

# *I, Libertine* **THEODORE STURGEON**

*writing as* Frederick R. Ewing

*author of*  
***More Than Human***



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# I, Libertine

Theodore Sturgeon writing as  
Frederick R. Ewing



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# FIRST AMERICAN PUBLICATION OF A MODERN CLASSIC ...

England in the late 18th Century—a lusty, brawling isle, vital, colorful, conspicuously sceptered, a hallowed plot in fullest flower, vigorously burgeoning, teeming, seething in ferment as the British spirit sought dominion over half the world. It was an adventurous era of plenty, and of cruel want: Appalling poverty and fabulous riches lived side by side. It was an age at cross-purposes with itself: Moral laxity and high achievement were accepted companions. It was an age of brilliant enlightenment, and of spectacular abandonment to unworthy pursuits and seamy pleasures. It was a beginning—and an end.

This is the England of *I, Libertine*. In bringing to life the temper of these tempestuous years, Frederick R. Ewing has created an unforgettable hero, Lance Courtenay, who strove to overcome his clouded origin by ruthlessly exploiting the men who befriended him and the women who loved him. Already a resounding success in England and on the Continent, this controversial novel is now available, for the first time, to the American public which has so eagerly anticipated its publication in this country.

# 1.

IT HAD BEEN A bright forgathering, bright people with their bright talk suffusing him with the warm radiance of his own bright future. Captain Lance Courtenay was proud of himself; he had watched his own words, all evening, falling as ordered and as startling as the brocade on his fashionable waistcoat; he felt his presence in such company was as timely and as casual as the stylish solitaire about his neck. Ay, bright was the word, and the next (or the one after) would be brilliant. Captain Courtenay was on his way.

"Not on your way so soon?" asked Lady Blanton as he bent over her wrinkled hand; and again he was pleased, for his ear was quick and he knew the overtones of sincerity when they appeared in a common phrase.

"I leave part of myself with you, milady," he said. He knew a way to produce his words with a breath like sighing and a firm rumble deep in his chest, a whisper with a contrabass. "You know I remain here in spirit, and a decent bit of my heart is yours alone."

"Along with you, rascal," she said, but she fluttered, she twinkled; she had been reached. "You'd eyes only for Miss Axelrood the whole evening."

This was true, but he shook his head and smiled. His teeth were excellent, especially the right upper incisor, which was extraordinary. "As we say in Devon, who studies a sheep to steal had better know the shepherdess."

The old lady laughed heartily, then drew him a step into the foyer. "I think to this day I've heard Libby Chudleigh called everything but a shepherdess." Sobering, she leaned close and said, almost anxiously, "Tell me, Captain, as a young man correct in all things; do you think it quite—ah—*proper* of me to entertain her, even when she brings such an ornament as her little Miss Axelrood?"

He contemplated her question and her earrings. Her earrings were diamond clusters, probably Italian, and glorified Mammon more than the Muses; he was delighted with them, and with their owner, who prompted him, "Have

I embarrassed you, young man?"

"You have gratified me, milady. ... As to your question, I feel that your house is the heart of Holborn, Holborn the heart of London, and London the heart of the world. If then all things are in the world, do not all things have a place here?"

"You have not answered my question, and you have been charming," said Lady Blanton approvingly. "Tell me this too: do you always call for your carriage at the very peak of an evening?"

"My carriage called for me," he rejoined. At the same time he managed to raise and hold his hat in a way which might have had significance; at any rate, she glanced at it. It was a wide-brimmed hat of the usual mode, drawn up and pinned three-corner style. "Ah," she said, "you military men, with your mysterious comings and goings! ... Where may I reach you, Captain?"

Behind the warmth and sincerity of his smile, a small explosion of exasperation threatened. That again—always that! What gleaming boots and good broadcloth could accomplish, the lack of an address could sweep away. With England weighted to sinking with town houses and granges, castles and manors, he had none to claim, even as resident, even as visitor. He said, "I cannot say, milady. I await orders; they come tomorrow at the latest. If one might have the privilege of writing ..."

"You may call it a duty. Good night, young man."

"Milady." He kissed her hand again, and strode quickly through the door, which stood open to the warm spring night—too quickly for a sight of the servant's outstretched palm. Down the steps he sprang, and into his carriage, which stood all agleam in a fair yellow paint and dull red trim, a match to the small crest of the Courtenays on the quarter-panel.

The coachman gathered his lines and grumbled in a resounding basso: "Eh, my peacock, another instant o' that chitty-chatty and ye'd a' ridden 'ome astride yer own arse."

"Hush, you old fool," snapped the Captain, and then, "Hold—*halt!*" as the wet gray entrance brought forth a vision. Down the steps came the fair Miss Axelrood, little feet atwinkle and her hoops held high. She leaped to the



carriage step, alighting like a bird, her eyes and teeth sparkling in the glow from Blanton House. Lance Courtenay impulsively caught at her bare shoulder to steady her, and she turned it under his hand and away, laughing. He had to control the impulse to look down into his hand, such warmth and smoothness seemed to cling there. "You have at last been ungallant, Captain Courtenay, and all evening I had been sure you could not."

"I assure you, Miss Axel—"

"A gentleman," she chided, "is never inadvertently impolite." Before he could rephrase this toward understanding, she gave him that small dazzling laugh again and explained, "You left and bade me no adieux."

"A thousand pardons," he whispered, the hiss with the viol. "I leave against my will. A sudden and most urgent—"

"I don't want your apologies, Captain Courtenay, and I'll allow all your explanations. I have flown out here, bold as can be, only for your farewell."

"Au revoir ... ?" he hazarded.

"Ah," she said, "just that, I know we shall meet again."

"It could not be too soon."

"It could. It shall be!" and she sprang away to the steps and up them, turning to laugh again just as she disappeared.

"Now there's a saucy bit," rumbled the coachman, "and one to 'ware of, Lanky."

"Drive, dash it all, Piggott."

"Higger-Piggott," said the man good-naturedly, leaning heavily on the aspirant. "Don't take away my respectable 'yphen." He flicked his lines and the coach rumbled into Gray's Inn Road.

Lance Courtenay waited until they were safely out of earshot of Blanton House and the traffic around it, and then flared, "Damme, I'll take away more than your blasted hyphen if you don't stop making a fool of me in front of your betters."

"Eh," shrugged the coachman, "ye come by it honest, Lanky. We're all fools. ... 'Oo is that pretty baggage, any'ow?"

Fuming, Lance ignored the question. Through Oxford Street he ignored it, and through the river corner of Cheapside; but at the bridge he surprised himself by

answering: "She's a Miss Axelrood."

The coachman said nothing. Lolloping down between the bridge shops, the coach was half across the river before Lance amended: "She was brought by Miss Chudleigh."

This got a response; Piggott hummed with interest. "Was she then! How long has the old hoor been back in England?"

"I don't know. Not long." He was always reluctant, somehow, to discuss anything with the foul-mouthed old man; yet Piggott was in a position to pick up an encyclopedic amount of gossip. He said, challengingly, "She's a splendid-looking woman, though I had only a glimpse of her. She's not old, Piggott."

"She's seen 'er two-score, and 'alf another one by now. Why, she was your age when she went naked to the Venetian Ambassador's ball, and that was five-and-twenty year ago, at the least."

"Not naked, Piggott!"

"Ay, naked, and d'ye think they pitched her into the Serpentine for that? Na, 'is admirin' Majesty the Second George gave 'er a fifty-guinea watch. Greedy bitch! D'ye know she's wed to the Earl of Bristol's brother?"

"I don't know that. I had heard it," said Lance primly.

"She is, for all that. Could've 'ad the Earl of Bath, and struck the Duke of Hamilton 'twixt wind and water, takin' a piece along like a cannonball off a oaken frigate. Maid of Honour at Court she was. Eh! I could tell you what she was made of ... but 'twas Bristol's brother she wanted and Bristol's brother she got one midnight, then off 'e goes to sea. Whelped one for 'im too, or so they say."

"Whatever became of the child?"

Piggott shrugged wide old shoulders. "Dead by now, or given away. Growin' up somewhere like the rest of us, believin' what 'e's told whether it's true or not. 'E might've been the first the bitch dropped by the wayside, and 'e might not. I can tell you 'e weren't the last, and mayhap the last 'asn't passed those portals e'en now; old Lib's still at it."

"Piggott, you've a filthy mouth."

"Ay. It's a filthy time."

Lance looked out over the black water and denied this with all his being. Long association with Piggott made this

denial a silent one, but none the less fervent for that. There was right and there was wrong; though these may not immediately present themselves to a man, he need only dig a little deeper, wait a little longer, to find them out. The dirty grey world in which Piggott lived filled him with horror, drove him constantly toward the white purities of a gentleman's existence. Yet the fact remained that grey was made up of particles of white in the blackness, and Piggott presented him with many of these. "What do you mean she's still at it?"

"What d'ye *talk* about in yon cold-frame of a 'ouse, you and t'other winter blooms?" Piggott blazed.

"Whatever it is, it isn't hostlers' gossip."

"And a pity." Piggott aimed his whip handle at the young man's broadcloth. "England and Prussia rule the ruddy world this Anno ruddy Domino seventeen 'undred an' sixty nine," he orated, "and those that rule the world take the orders of their 'ostlers, ay, their valets and their Maids of ruddy Honour. They do what they're told, they do, because their servants always know what's 'appening, and they can't know 'till they're told, like a ruddy great general wantin' to know what's 'appening over the 'ill. 'E *could* ask 'is batman an' likely 'e does; otherwise it's someone else's batman 'oo finds out, or it 'as to go all the way down the line to a weary-arse grenadier 'oo finally sticks 'is 'ead over and eats grapeshot for 'is breakfast ... and 'oo's more of a servant than anybody's ruddy foot soldier, I'd like to know? While you're about learnin' your airs and graces, m'lad, never forget to leave an ear in the scullery, and be grateful to whoever keeps the wax out of it for ye. What were we talkin' about?"

"You were making some libelous remarks about Miss Chudleigh."

"Na, lad, 'twas slander," the old man corrected. In the darkness, Lance Courtenay blushed; there were reasons why the distinction should have been his to make. Piggott went on, "Milord Augustus Hervey, the Duke of Bristol's brother 'as so many 'orns on 'im from our Lib 'tis said without 'is wig 'e looks like a ruddy 'all-tree. When she 'asn't been 'awkin 'er wares to foreigners on their 'ome grounds, she's been the hoor o' the Duke o' Kingston, ol' Evey Pierrepont."

"Look," said Lance, too enthralled at this point to affect disdain, "if she really is Hervey's wife, why has she kept it a secret all these years?"

"'Ad to. When 'e slipped the ring on 'er 'and, 'e wasn't of age. Afraid 'e wouldn't inherit if it got about, and so was she. By the time 'e did come in for 'is small slice, she was already abed with Kingston and wanted no mite nor morsel of 'er 'usband. 'E's a queer duck, any'ow, Bristol is, 'appy with 'is ships an 'is grouse, and with 'er too, long as she keeps 'er 'ooks out o' the Bristol treasury. And that she does, with Kingston there to cover 'er nakedness when 'e ain't using it, and giving 'er bits of town 'ouses to keep the rain off."

"That can't last long."

"Ay. We all get older."

"What do you mean by that?"

"It's been going on these four-and-twenty year, lad—since before you were born."

"I can't believe it! Why doesn't he divorce her?"

Piggott's burst of laughter startled the off horse. When he had her reined in, he said, "Scandal, lad."

"Isn't all *this* scandal?"

"Na. It's what you call 'ostlers' gossip. Fine folk can stand any amount o' that. But bring in your courts, an' your swear-in's and defaults, an' it's scandal, an' that hurts 'em. Bristol's not like England an' Frederick the ruddy Great these days; fight a war for seven year and settle it with everybody 'ome where they come from, what they call status quo ante only the poorer for it. Kingston's getting what 'e's paying for, or thinks 'e is or 'e wouldn't be paying it; and Libby Chudleigh's got enough o' the Kingston entrails wrapped around 'er finger to make a duchess of 'er, weren't it for Hervey. She'll not drop 'im while 'e stands to inherit, and she'll not drop Kingston either. They all take their pleasures, lad, and the only real cost is—'ostlers' gossip."

"I'm glad such people have your approval," said Lance, regaining his loftiness.

"Ye're a smarmy little prig," said Piggott reflectively.

"We're coming into Southwark," said Lance. "We'd better—"

"Ay," said the coachman, pulling left to the curb. He

lashed up the reins and plunged his arms down into the boot. From it he drew a folded cloak, which he handed down to Lance, receiving the Captain's good woolen for it. Lance threw on the second cloak, removed his tricorne, unpinned the ribbons and let the brim drop. Piggott swung down and stepped to the right quarter-panel, where after a moment he emerged with the crest of the Courtenays, three red roundels on a golden field. This he placed on the seat beside Lance. He went around to the left side and turned the air blue with his imprecations. "Some pile-ridden catamite's been at me coach!" he roared. "Four shillin' six an' three farthin's up the spout, or 'alf of it, and God blind you if you say get another, Lanky."

Lance leaned out and looked. Piggott was pounding the dangling straps from which the second Courtenay crest had been unbuckled. "What happened to it?"

"What 'appened to the 'oly Grail? *I* don't know, damn blast the pox-puckered mother of the fatherless colonial 'oo did this."

"You're losing your sight with your wits in your old age," said Lance. "Next they'll have the wheels while you sit on the box a-gossip with some other old swine."

"By God we've crossed the river and it's your turn to keep a civil tongue in yer 'ead, ye little wart."

"This bargain is beginning to be over-costly to me," said the young man icily.

"Then strike a bargain with some other 'ackney. There's upwards o' five 'undred on the streets today, a good third cast-off privates like this'n. Among so many, surely to God ye can find a fool like me, but by my dangling breek, it must be a greater one."

"The more fool I," returned Lance. "Ye'd be back in the stables standing in muck whilst the other hostlers curried your face, taking it for the hind end of a spavined mare, weren't it for me. Who found ye this trap? Who paid to dress and paint it? Who flogged ye into a decent livery and taught ye to blow your nose on your sleeve instead of snapping it in your lap? Who but me?"

"Ye found the coach, I'll grant; but 'oo paid for it? Ye bought paint; 'oo laid it on? Ye prettied me up along of the trap, and I'll grant a quality fare say twice a fortnight for

that, but 'oo gives up 'is 'ackney money masquerading as a popinjay's pimp, ay, and stands for yer 'igh an' mighty insults the while?"

Reverting to the cadences of a Courtenay, and with an imperious gesture, Lance said. "We have arrived at the dissolution of our partnership, Higger-Piggott. You may drive me to my inn, and thereafter you may find your own perdition."

Even in the dark, Lance could see the black furious flush crossing the old man's face. His voice was thick with anger as he snapped his whip out of the brace and set foot on the step. The carriage leaned and creaked with his weight, he loomed over the young man like a breaking sea, he sprayed and spat as he growled. "Ay, sir, ay, sir, that I will, sir; drive ye to yer inn, and on the instant; but I faithfully promise ye, God rot me, that I shall tie up these ruddy 'orses 'ere and now and do my driving with this cat," and he whistled his lash close to the crown of Lance's newly slouched hat.

Now it has been recorded that all of this young man's teeth were beautiful, but that one of them was extraordinary. It was the right upper incisor, and its uniqueness lay in a subtle concavity, from gum to bite and from edge to edge, so finely wrought by nature's lapidary that its difference from the other teeth was invisible on the closest inspection. And like most other wonders created by man or God, this one was meaningless out of its context. Its context was, of course, the man himself, specifically the musculature of his upper lip, and generally, his emotional makeup. The latter reacted, in all its complexities, most extremely under the impact of terror. The numbness in the back of the knees, the palpitation which struck at the base of the throat like a heavy fist, the aching hollowness in the solar plexus need not concern us here. The drying of the mouth, occurring instantly and completely, does. For this resulted in an adhesion of the concave tooth to the inside of the upper lip—an utterly unbearable sensation. Simultaneously the lips expanded as the cheeks contracted, increasing the hardness of the vacuum which married flesh to enamel.

The net result was a spastic smile, tight over the teeth

and very wide, a narrowing of the eyes so sudden that (though they held only squeezed tears) they glittered like polished steel, and, directly over *the* tooth, just to the right of the median line, a slight, unceasing movement, as the imprisoned lip fought to free itself from the vise of vacuum. It was not a twitch, but rather a writhe, a ripple. Such a movement may be seen on the lips of the great cats just as they are about to attack. Such a shift of the lip might result in a sneer, if allowed to complete one; this, however, did not; the combined forces of smile and suction contained it too well for that.

Men who sneer at their potential attackers may cow a few but are more often attacked. Men who smile in the face of danger are more rare, and are less often attacked. Men whose sneer is there to be seen, and all but eclipsed in a smile, send a message of such confidence that the enemy must turn into himself, find himself face to face with the fear of inferiority which lurks, to some degree, in every man; and with shocked eyes filled with this, will ask himself in frightened wonderment, "How did *he* know?" A more intimate question cannot be framed, a more vital one may not be imagined. In that instant the urge to attack is replaced by something greater—the desire to have that question answered; and whatever his urgency, whatever his reasons, whomever else he might ever attack, this one man is safe from him, especially because he will never answer.

So it was that the great grizzled coachman hung over the youth who smiled up at him; and when Lance, in purest terror, began to rise, and because of the confines of the carriage, brought this towering enigma of an expression closer and closer to his enemy of the moment, Piggott's rage dissolved into another thing which ran saltily down his cheek. He stepped back to the curb.

"Eh," he grunted, his features all a-pucker and his hands fumbling with the forgotten whip, "we 'ave no quarrel, thee and me, lad. I'll not deny I need thee more than thou needest me and one day thee'll fly up and away and leave me forgotten in this mud I dwell in." He swallowed hard, and from the way his features wrung, one might think it burst something in his throat.

Then in a rumble more normal for him, he said, "I curse

ye, Lanky, myself, and sometimes God that this should be so, but ...” He raised his heavy hands and let them fall ... “It is so.”

He climbed up on the box while Lance sank weakly back, shaken to the marrow as he always was by this sequence. It had happened many times before, and always it looked like the end of the world, and then like a swirling faint, and then like a miracle, wherein he emerged from his shameful paralysis to be hailed as victor. He was well loved for it, too; always unbelieving, utterly incognizant of the forces he had displayed (even in facsimile) he would wear his laurels gently, treating his defeated enemy with a residual fear which looked exactly like humility and compassion.

“Perhaps you’re right,” he said as the coach drummed on the cobbles of the Borough High Street, “At times I do go on like a smarmy little prig.”

“Na,” said the old man, “and I’ll thank ye not to talk so about yerself. *I* might; ay, *I* might again, too, but I’ve a right to be ill-mannered, being what I am.”

“I shall always be myself, this side of the river,” said Lance contritely.

“This’ll not be your side very long,” growled the coachman, scowling at the filth and squalor, the clutter and clabber of these late silent streets; even deserted, they seemed to ring with the press which had abandoned them and which would tumble out in the morning, stinking of its sweat and pots and poverty. “Look ye, fold yer cloak over yer mouth, lad; I swear this city’s not fit for a gentleman to breathe in; ye can get the bloody pox from a gulp o’t. ... ’Ere’s Long Lane now, and we’ll ’ave Bermondsey and ’ome directly.”

“I’ll get us a new crest, Piggott.”

“Na. Y’eve a look about ye that can’t be covered by a slouch ’at and a journeyman’s cape, Lanky, and ever’ groat’s worth will cost ye a thr’pny bit. Leave it to me; I’ll get old ’Omber to cut us a ’scutcheon for summat less than a bishop’s tithe.”

“Very well, but I’ll pay it.”

“Na, na, lad. ’Twas not your doing. ...What did you say was the name of that brazen bit who chased ye out of



Blanton 'Ouse?"

"Miss Axelrood."

"Ah. I knew it minded me of summat."

"You know anything about her?"

Piggott chuckled. "Na, Lanky. The name made me think I need some tallow on these journals or we'll be a-shriekin' like a oxcart and I'll be loadin' thatch instead o' quality folk."

"Now, Piggott. I know you. What else?"

"What else could there be?"

"What about Miss Axelrood?"

The old man scratched his head. "A mere thought, like. About 'er and, you know, 'er Ladyship the Countess-Duchess of Almost."

"Miss Chudleigh?"

"Ay. Now there's a woman 'as a natural gift for hoorin'. She was a great beauty at the start—but so were those poor silly Gunning sisters, them that married Hamilton an' Coventry. D'ye know seven 'undred people waited up all one night to see those two come out of an inn in the morning? Yet there was nothin' hoorish about them. Then mayhap it ain't beauty, but gall, what you call brazenness. Well, that poor mad Hannah Snell what joined the army and was wounded at Pondicherry, and dug out 'er own bullet lest the surgeon find 'er out—she 'ad more gall than anybody but ye can't rightly call 'er a hoor. Or ye might say the talent lies in ways and means, like.

"Na, bein' that kind of a hoor takes more gifts than Dr. Johnson, Dame Jezebel and a gypsy juggler could trot out together. Like the way Lib magicked King Fred of Prussia, 'im they call the Great. Did she do it with 'er sparklin' wit? She did not. Did she do it even by waggin' 'er bottom? Not 'er. All she did was drink 'is 'ealth in fine strong Rhenish—a full English quart of it at a gulp; ay, and another like it to wash it down, one-two, less than half a minute, so they say. One of 'er gifts—part of the 'ole gift of hoorin'." He wagged his head reverently.

"Piggott, what the devil are you talking about? Miss Axelrood?"

"At the moment," said Piggott with considerable dignity, "hoorin'. And the gift. The gift." He drove in

thoughtful silence for a time. "I 'ad a dog, a splendid spaniel bitch, 'oo—"

"Good God!"

"Ye're not 'earing me out, Lanky. She 'ad a gift—rats. She could whip out rats where no rats were, snip-snap-snorem, an' fill the air with flyin' dead rats. Bring 'em 'ome, she would, and stack 'em up like faggots in the ruddy dooryard. An' proud? I 'ad a tanner make me a hanger belt so wide, all o' braided rats' tails, two 'undred an' three of 'em approximate. I never wore it but the first time; she come at me like a fiend wi' th' fistula."

"Piggott, what has this to do with—"

"Hush, laddy-buck. As I was sayin', it was a gift. The thing to remember about 'er an' 'er rats, as with 'er Ladyship, is that with both the pretty bitches the gift come natural in all its parts. An' it used to come to me often as I sat admirin' 'er grace—it's the spaniel I'm speakin' about now—'er grace an' skill, that if she'd 'ad the company of some older rat-hunter since she was weaned, why 'er talents might've been cultivated instead of growin' wild as they did. Wild, they were splendid; what might they've been with a bit o' tutorin'?"

"Ridiculous, Piggott! She caught more rats than you knew what to do with as it was!"

"So she did, and ye've put yer finger on the point about ratters; good enough is good enough. But what must a hoor be that she couldn't be better? What could she get that she was stopped from more? Ye see, if ye consider it careful there's a difference after all, between bitches and hoors. Now take Lib Chudleigh for one; she 'as a enviable freedom far as it goes, but when ye use yer longest-handled muckrake, ye'll understand she's boxed. She's got to a pretty spot indeed, but it's one she can't move from. She can't marry Kingston for being wed to Hervey; she can't divorce Hervey for fear o' losing her share of 'im, in case 'e gets to be the Earl o' Bristol. What she should do is marry Kingston first and then despatch 'er Augie, but that might smack o' bigamy. *Hennyway*, that's Chudleigh, and it's not 'er I'm discussin'."

"It isn't?"

"Ain't ye been listening, Lanky? Tsk, tsk. All I said was

she's boxed, an' that shows she 'as a limit an' she's reached it. It occurs to me as I'm sure it 'as to 'er, that if she'd 'ad the proper 'ands to guide 'er in 'er youth she might 'ave done more and come farther."

"A little late for sore regret," said Lance in his prim voice.

"Ay, it is, for 'er; but a woman like 'er 'as a pride in 'er accomplishments, as a fine barrister might 'ave, or a horse trainer or one of them chaps paints pitchers. What might they do in the autumn o' their life," he orated with a showy gesture, "with their lives be'ind them and all their great skills still at a peak, leastways for knowin' 'ow, even if they couldn't do it? Why, they do what yer friend an' mentor Simon Barrowbridge did; they indent an apprentice, that's what, an' convey to the young all the wisdom of their ruddy mucking years, that's what they do."

Lulled by the rich rough voice and its ready cadences, Lance was perhaps slow to absorb exactly what simple, single thing the old man was saying in these thousands of words. When it came to him he sat up, he stood up, he shouted, "Piggott!"

Immediately a third-storey casement banged open and twice the voice of a crow screamed down, "*Stop thy bloody squealin', ye shited swine, an' give a decent lidy a wink o' sleep!*" The decent lady followed her suggestion with a more substantial stream of hints from her slops-pot which Piggott avoided by an adroit gigging of the horses, and they proceeded at a spine-shaking trot. "Savin' that up for a week," growled Piggott of their would-be donor, "the old miser." He drew the horses in and gentled them, until at last Lance could be heard as he said, "What you're saying is that Miss Axel—"

"What I'm saying is this alone, Lanky: if Lib Chudleigh 'as apprenticed a gel, and if that apprentice 'as anything like the natural talent of 'er ruddy governess, an' *if* that talented apprentice is yer Miss Axelrood—"

"That's three 'ifs' " said Lance good-humoredly.

"And if," Piggott rolled on, ceaselessly as surf, "—you may 'ave a fourth, Lanky—if this pretty little poiniard of a gel has pointed 'erself your way, ye may call yerself but the bottom tread on a long flight o' steps, to be tossed aside as

someone else wins the palm.”

Lance threaded his way through the mangled metaphor and then laughed uneasily. “All this, Piggott, because a lass ran out for a forgotten farewell?”

“Ay, all that, and also to take yer tender thoughts away from the cobbles an’ stinks.”

“I’d rather the cobbles an’ stinks,” Lance mimicked. “Piggot, I do think you’re mad.”

“Ay, and so do I, lad, for not wantin’ ye out of yer depth. ... ’Ere’s yer ruddy manor ’ouse, milord.”

“Take care my cloak doesn’t go the way of the ’scutcheon,” said Lance as he stepped down, knowing that the old ruffian rightly read the annoyed affection in his tone. He could be quite sure of it as Piggott swept off his varnished hat and bowed from the box. “If the marster ’as need of me ’e need only ring; I await ’is pleasure.”

“If the marster ’as need of you he’ll ruddy well walk down to the Purple Hart hoping you’re not to drunk to speak.”

“Take care, laddy,” rumbled Piggott, and whipped up his horses.

Lance stood at the curb watching him go, wanting to laugh, wanting to spit, wanting to make a gesture of some kind he wouldn’t make if he could think of it. Then he took the old man’s parting words at their explicit value, standing well back from the arch of the courtyard, looking for shadows any blacker than they should be, any slight movement which did not belong. Over him the sign of the Dirty Beast creaked, once, but that was only a breath of wind. (It had been the Doughty Lion before the Lord Protector changed the fashion.)

He stepped cautiously through the arch, sidled to the right and got his back to the wall. Footpads usually operated out of their home districts, but sometimes the need was great, and in the dark ... but tonight no one was about. Lance crossed the courtyard and tiredly mounted the outside staircase to the second storey. At the top he paused again, but still heard nothing but the impatient thump of a dreaming horse in the stables below. Sighing with weariness, he went back to his room, taking from his waistcoat the great iron key. He unlocked the door, kned it

open, kicked it closed behind him, and with the practiced motion of long habitation, knocked down the bar.

The pop and sputter of a stinking sulphur match caught him between breaths, and in the magnitude of his astonishment, the small sound deafened him. The flame, when it came, gave him only itself and blindness; he saw it half-die as it passed to a taper, and then the candle was lit.

Seated at his table, with his polished-copper mirror propped against the wall, clad in a shift of fine sheer lawn, sat Miss Axelrood. She smiled into the mirror, a second flame in a copper world, and her eyes held his.

She began to comb her heavy hair.

## 2.

THE DRUMMING IN HIS ears began to have a visible accompaniment—spots and blotches of black intruding between himself and the night-lit spectre before him. But the spectre said, “You may breathe now, Captain,” in Miss Axelrood’s wicked half-whisper and gave him her half-wicked smile, so he breathed again.

“Miss Ax—”

“Shh!” she said quickly, silencing him. “This is not the time for names. They told me down below that this was the room of Master Lancaster Higger-Piggott, a barrister’s apprentice. How little that matters, since my business is with *you*, Captain.”

“Y-yes,” he stammered, “H-he has gone to—uh—and will not return until, uh—”

“Until after I leave,” she finished for him. She turned about to look directly at him; he felt himself blink as at a flare of light, she was so beautiful. He felt trapped, shocked, clumsy and guilty in guilt’s most humiliating hue; it was like being caught cheating at cards, on a Sunday, in a vestry, with one’s nose running. He became acutely aware of his shabby cloak and the drooping brim of his let-down hat, which he now snatched away. He fumbled at the edge of his cloak and abruptly sat on the edge of his bed, very probably because he could no longer stand up. She had put the candle on the tabouret, between them to one side. He could see her body clearly through the shift, yet she moved, she gestured, she held herself as if gowned and brocaded and presentable in a crowded drawing-room. She conducted herself, as it were, outside the obvious, in some made-up world of her own, furnished and populated only by what she chose to have in it. And she had the power to share this universe, wherein everything was as it should be according to her dictates; for she said, “How wise of you, Captain, to change your fine cloak for one like that, when duty calls you into such surroundings!”

Almost in spite of himself, he smiled at that, and her

answering smile was immediate and ingenuous. He rose and threw off the cloak, casting open his coat as well, so that the fine brocade of his waistcoat might radiate *Courtenay* instead of *Piggott*. With the gesture he found his tongue. "I am, as you see, overwhelmed, Miss Axelrood. Had I known you were coming, I—"

"Had you known, Captain, then I shouldn't have come at all. I meant it to be a surprise."

"It is a surprise," he acknowledged, knowing this to be the most inadequate sentence he had ever spoken. She laughed happily and took three or four strokes with the comb. Lance heard the drums beating again. Eardrums. He had an irresistible urge to explain himself. "This horrible place," he began, "it's this Piggott chap's room, as you have —"

"Yes, of course," she said warmly, "and you've arranged to stop here during his absence while you investigate certain unpleasant matters in Bermondsey. I do not question your conduct, Captain, and I shall not. You, in turn, need not question mine ... we are both here. It is strange, it is unexpected, it is undoubtedly scandalous; but it's true."

With a shade of his practiced courtliness he said, "To make it true I shall have to understand one thing—how did you arrange to be here before me? For I came directly across London Bridge, and you did not overtake me. ... Or shall we make this a dream after all?"

"By no means," she twinkled. "I came by Westminster and the Kent road, right across Southwark."

"So far," he breathed, "... so quickly."

"So eagerly," she whispered.

He found his gaze locked with hers, and suddenly he could not break it away; yet her saw her, all of her, as she rose and crossed to him. "So it's quite real, quite, quite real and true," she murmured. From the bed she took his cloak. "Where do you hang this?"

"Just so," he choked, pressing it from her hands and letting it fall.

She had unusual ears. The lobes were not free, yet one could not know this without touching them, and then they presented a warm smooth channel from jaw to nape-side.

Along this his ring-finger found a half-inch of ecstasy to travel and travel. He buried his face in the hollow of her shoulder and traced the channel, seeing it with the pad of his fingertip, seeing it misted and phantasmagoric with the lightest of contact, seeing it sharply with firmness, seeing it as through crooked glass with just a little cruelty in his finger.

He was troubled, in a way life had familiarized him with. For advantages are hard to come by, and the best of them are those which one makes for oneself, and they are best because they are advantages one can understand. When the skies open and pour down golden sovereigns, one may pick some up and own them, and spend some and profit thereby; but if one is Lance Courtenay, one does this anxiously: *I did not earn this or make it; I do not understand what it means and doubtless I shall have to pay a greater price than any I'd have agreed to had I been asked first.* Which made him, in this magic moment, feel lucky indeed, but not happy.

At length he asked, "Why?"

She laughed softly. "Because I wanted to talk to you. Haha! You will forget that answer to that question, and then you will remember it, and then you will come to me and ask me what I meant, and all I shall say is—'I wanted to talk to you.' And then you will understand, and be angry."

"Not angry at you!"

"Ah no. At you."

He raised his head and looked into her eyes. He saw in them two candle flames; the twin vertical beams made her excessively feline. He liked it. He dropped his head and fell to stroking her ear again. "Talk to me, then."

"You know ever so much about the law." It was not a question, and he did not deny it. "And," she said, "you know Miss Chudleigh."

"I had not thought of them in the same breath." She giggled. "You'll come to know her quite well one day, I think. Would you like that?"

He thought of Elizabeth, Countess of Bristol (if she ever was) and of Elizabeth, Duchess of Kingston (if she should ever be) and then of Elizabeth Chudleigh, who had charmed Bath and Hamilton and even Frederick the Second, King of



Prussia, whom they called the Great; who had done enough, heaven knows, to be scourged out of any village, and yet who was accepted still in the highest circles of society—even at court. Yes, he would like to know her quite well. But he would like to be very cautious too. The mighty fall; the high fall farthest; woe betide what they fall on. And too, there was the matter of common decency.

"I'd like to know more of her, before knowing her well."

"Then ask me."

Ask? Ask what? He thought of the coachman's rollicking account, and all but mimicked it then and there; instead, he laughed. "Is it true she attended the Venetian Ambassador's Ball stark-naked?"

"It is not. She wore a ... costume."

"Ah? I heard that, and that his Majesty gave her a fifty-guinea watch—something one might call a public tribute," he added, having found the gentry responsive always to quips about taxes.

"That too is a lie," said the girl. "It was thirty-five."

"She is a much maligned lady, then."

"She is. Now I suppose you are going to ask me about the Duke."

"Many people do."

"They are dear friends. Why should there be talk? It seems so ungenerous ... they would, if they could, still it forever by marrying; it is their dearest wish. Why must they be termed indecent, when their aim is decency?"

"But they have not married."

"Ay," she said sadly, "and therefore the scullery crucifies them."

"The scullery which says she is wed to Augustus Hervey—the future Earl of Bristol."

"Even so."

"Well," he demanded, "is she?"

"If she were, or even if it ... seemed so ... would there be a remedy?"

"Making it quite possible for her to marry Kingston? Ay, but for that you'd seek a footpad's counsel, not mine."

"You distress me," she said faintly, turning her head away like a schoolgirl seeing blood.

"If she divorced ... na, Bristol would never stand the noise. Eh? I thought so. ... And if Augustus Hervey divorced her, no littlest curate nor biggest bishop would wed her to Kingston. Unless ... She couldn't manage a dispensation, or some ..."

"She has too many enemies," said Miss Axelrood sadly, "like all great beauties."

"Then there's no hope for it; she'll have to wait it out. And Kingston by far the older man. Too bad."

"Oh dear. I thought ... I thought you might ..."

He sat up on the edge of the bed and took her strongly by the shoulders, though he did not move her "Why me? Why did you come to me for this?"

She glanced quickly about the shabby room. "We—I thought perhaps your friend, Master Higger-Piggott, might quietly discover a way. Isn't he apprenticed to Mr. Barrowbridge? And isn't Mr. Barrowbridge quite the cleverest and most learned man of law of his time?"

"He—I'm told he is," said Lance. An unpleasant confusion curled within him, like the first smoke before sudden flame. "If Mr. Barrowbridge could help, surely Miss Chudleigh need only—"

But she was slowly shaking her head as he spoke; and his voice trailed off. She said, "Years ago they had an unhappy meeting. I know of it, but then, I don't gossip. A very tragic story, poor man ... and it were unwise even to mention Miss Chudleigh's name to him. I had hoped that your friend might, without mentioning ..." In a sudden change of voice she asked, "What of this young Higger-Piggott? What do you know of him? Who is he? Where does he come from?"

He dropped his eyes. "You ... seem to know so very much already," he said unsteadily.

"But tell me, *Captain Courtenay*. I would rather hear this from you than from anyone I know."

"You're playing with me!"

She put her long hand against his cheek. It felt very cool and strong. "Have I played with you?"

"I'll ... ask Higger-Piggott when I see him." He sounded almost surly.

"Tell me now. I'm very interested in Master Lancaster

Higger-Piggott and his father the coachman.”

“*That’s a lie!*”

“My dear, my *dear*,” she soothed. He looked at her, but her face was only solicitous. If she had smiled, or gloated—if he had even suspected anything of the sort, he might have ... might have ... but surely there was nothing of the sort there. And her questions guarded him, always, in their strange way.

“He’s ... he was brought up by a coachman, yes. Actually he’s of ... gentle birth. Perhaps noble. There’s a great mystery there. He is in law because he means to find out, one day, just who he is. No one knows of this, of course—not even old Barrowbridge. A very studious chap. He’ll be a gentleman one day.” He smiled suddenly.

“I’m sure he will. Do you like him?”

“Eh? Why—yes, I rather do.”

“I could come to like him too, I think,” she said.

They had a silent moment. He had never felt such perfect understanding with anyone in his life before. But then, he had been close to very few people before.

“Now,” she said, “tell me about Captain Courtenay.”

He flushed, and laughed. “Oh, there’s very little to Captain Courtenay. He’s—what you see, no more.”

“It’s a good thing to be, a Courtenay.”

“Yes, it is; but why do you say that?”

“Well, there are so many of you. England’s full of Courtenays, and in Devon they outnumber the hedgerows.” She tilted her head. “Safety in numbers.”

“In a way. I ... don’t commune very much with my ... kin, though.”

“And then,” she said thoughtfully, “there’s the old story of the exiled Earl who died in Rome ...”

“Padua,” he said immediately, “Edward Courtenay, Earl of Devon. That was 1556. His ancient patent as earl omitted the words *de corpore suo*, which means that a male not heir *of his body* could inherit. William, a sixth cousin once removed, never claimed. There’ve been Earls of Devon since who were not Courtenays, and Courtenays who were baronets and viscounts without protest. There’s an earldom waiting for the right Courtenay, should he be able to prove his line, and should he, first, be a man the Lords would

notice. Meanwhile, the story is known, and knowing people do not offend any Courtenay, lest one day that Courtenay be admitted to the House. And then for the old estates in Ireland, and sweet Powderham in Devon ... and mayhap a fine marriage; the Courtenays were famous for the great marriages they made."

Again she touched his flushed cheek with her long cool hand, and again said, "It's a good thing to be, a Courtenay." She kissed him sweetly. "I think if a man had all the families in England to choose from, he could not have picked more wisely."

He laughed uncertainly. "Such a man would have no name at all to begin with."

"Then he'd not be cursed with a low one. To choose a finer name and title for oneself is, I think, a worthy enterprise. After all," she said, laughing, "we women have been doing it for some time."

He laughed. "Yet, to be born with—"

"A great name is a proud thing to be born with. But 'twould be a pity to be able to look only downward, even if all the rest of the world looked up at you. I'd rather be an Axelrood with a future than a Hanover with a past."

"You're an ... amazing child."

"Child is it! How old are you, Lance Courtenay, Earl of Devon to be and Lord of Powderham to come?"

"Three and twenty."

"Then we're a year and a bit apart, and you call me child!"

"You're not angry!" He really didn't know.

"Does an officer—does a gentleman play with children?"

"Yes!" he cried in irritation.

"Like this?" And then she looked into his face and laughed so hard that his shocked puzzlement disappeared and he lay and laughed with her. "Tell me," she said when she could, "what is it you want? I mean, your most secret secret."

"Why, to be—to have—"

"Na! Those are ambitions. I met a viscountess once who told me that of all the things in the wide world what she wanted most was to dance naked in the sun. She never had

and she knew she never would, but it was her dream. Have you no such dreams?"

"No!"

"Everyone has."

"You?"

"Even I. I'll tell you; but I've asked you first."

He thought for a moment and then chuckled. "I'll not tell you that."

"Why?"

"You wouldn't understand me. And if you did you—you'd never believe I'm not that sort of chap."

"You are not and you never shall be. I *do* understand; have I not told you about the dancing viscountess?"

It was warm and quiet and comforting to be there. He was unaccustomed to searching within himself for any values save right and wrong; in a way he regarded other concentrations as indulgences, very nearly sins. For a man had his way to make in the world, and the world was not, by and large, a friendly place, and it was impatient with idlers who sat by the way and told themselves their own dreams.

On the other hand there was little pleasure in his life. His daily tasks certainly could not be so described, and his occasional forays into elevated society across the river were not pleasure-journeys. There were times, then, when he gave himself five minutes of *fugue*, and rested from the very act of living. From these he always started up guiltily, and wished that he had not done it, and searched angrily for that which he should have been doing instead, and thereafter tried to expunge the vice from his conscience.

This was the very first time anyone had ever asked to share such a thing of his; this removed some of its viciousness. It was yet another example of the elusiveness of the good and evil which a man must understand to orient himself in the world. Anything sole, solitary, unshared, hoarded and secret can hardly be good. Its evil is ameliorated the instant it is approved by another; those things which are accepted of all men are what all men term good, now or later. In the light of ambition, one sees oneself an intimate of some growing good, one which will spread and be acceptable to all mankind, or at very least to the

masters thereof; and lo! one finds oneself accepted too, as its exponent. So much for the light of ambition; it is seldom that indulgence casts the same glow. In the light of indulgence he saw himself—

“I ... I see myself sometimes as one who holds all laws of man and morals at defiance,” he whispered, while she leaned close to hear. “I can find a moment, from time to time, briefly and a long while apart, when my mirror shows me such a one. He is no revolutionary, and he asks no help, wants no cohorts. The laws he breaks are not to be broken for themselves, as a mob might tear down walls, purely because they stand. No; he does what he does without regard to laws, with them or against them as the special case might dictate to him. He takes, he uses, he appropriates, he destroys as the whim suits him, without conscience and with no direction save that of his appetites. These are many, and he treasures them all.

“He takes never too much, no one thing ever too often, but lives with his appetites, keeping them all alive, never destroying the flavor of any one of them, never permitting one to command the others or him. His search is for more of them—more appetites to isolate and keep alive, pruned and orderly as a formal garden. He has escaped what plagues me, and everyone I know—the elevation of self to higher regard of mankind. He is free because he needs to be no more than he is. I say, ‘I must be more ...’ and ‘I must have more ...’ but he is free; he says only, ‘I am I.’ He is the compleat libertine. And in those rare moments I see him in the mirror, making some gracious gesture for the pleasure of its graciousness, and he says, ‘I, libertine...’ ”

He glanced quickly at her face, and for the second time that night the air was thick with the violence she could trigger with a single syllable of laughter. As before he met only a great tenderness; and wherever in it there was no understanding, there was the clear wish to understand.

Yet he defended his folly in telling her: “I’m *not* that way, you must understand that, I’m *not!* Perhaps I see the libertine as the very shadow of the things I am not, limned and delineated by the very things I am. For I may not flout laws, written or unwritten; I need them! For me to do what the libertine does would be to cut away each round of my

ladder as I met it, climbing.

"Disaster," he whispered, all but frightened, "disaster ... you see, I am not free, as he is. He is free of morals, of decency, of obedience and respect and loyalty. I may not be free; these things must be solid and permanent as I move amongst them, lest they fall and crush me; and where I can shore them up I must, and where I can rescue them, I must. Above all, men must point to me and say: There goes a decent man. I need that; the libertine does not. He needs only awareness of self, his appetites, and a certain ... circumspection. ... I've never talked like this in my life."

"You speak beautifully," she said, and, "I like your libertine."

He smiled. "And my Higger-Piggott."

"Ay. Even better. His aims are so similar to yours, and the libertine's so counter."

"You do understand. You do understand *me*," he half-sang.

"I do, or I certainly shouldn't be here."

"I'm so happy you're here ... now, you have a secret for me."

"Must I?"

He nodded. It made her hair move in the candlelight.

"Ah," she said, "I could not paint such a picture as yours; my poor tongue hasn't the skill. What I want ... what I want is only to see ... how ... high ... " She closed her eyes. He watched her fine face on his pillow and was content; if she would speak, he would watch and listen; if she would sleep, he would watch.

But she continued, suddenly and strongly, as if there had been no pause, "... to see how high one might fly. Just that." She sighed, long and longingly. "Especially to see how high—I might fly. ... D'ye know the dowry the Gunning sisters brought from Ireland with them, Lance? Beauty. Just beauty. Yet one was a duchess, one is now a duchess twice over and will mother dukes, I'll warrant. To have a lot, or even a little, and to reach the heights—how wonderful. To have nothing, and reach the heights, and then on the heights, to build a tall something ... ah!"

She smiled into herself, with her eyes closed, and said: "If I've a secret at all, it isn't counter to ambition, like yours,

and it isn't a place or a state of being, like yours; it's only a great happy question: how high is high?"

Suddenly she sat up, leaned over him, and framed his face with her two strong hands. "Lance, wouldst help us?"

She meant, he realized, none of the wishes and dreams they had traded. He harked back to what they had been speaking of earlier, and a slow frown appeared on his forehead. What she read in it he could not know, but she said immediately, "Miss Chudleigh desires only to marry her Duke. She would be grateful to whoever helped her."

"Grateful?" It was said in a way which meant "How grateful?"

She cast a significant glance around his shabby dwelling. "Have you thought where you might live after your ... duties here in Bermondsey are discharged? There's a little house, a holding of the Duke of Kingston, right on the edge of Holborn, which needs someone to keep it warm. It is convenient to every brilliant gathering in London—most pleasant for one who might have entry to all of them, ay, and the Court as well."

His eyes glowed. "There is great merit in Miss Chudleigh's case."

She smiled. "Decency and justice."

"The very things which mean most to me. ...Very well, I shall discuss this matter carefully with my good friend the barrister's boy, and we shall see what can be done to right the wrongs done your kind patroness."

"Ah. Lance, I knew you would!"

"Of course, my limitations just now ... certain military duties which I may not discuss ..."

"I quite understand. What Miss Chudleigh requires is simply—knowledge. Only to know how to proceed."

"And perhaps some assistance in the process."

"If you would be so generous." Again they smiled at one another. And with a single lithe motion she was away and across the room, to where her garments were neatly folded on a chair. She put them on quickly and without self-consciousness as she spoke, while he watched enchanted.

"Miss Chudleigh and I are with Lady Blanton for the time being," she said briskly. "Lady Blanton likes you, and you may be sure of a welcome there. I think Miss Chudleigh



would prefer not to discuss these painful matters with anyone, the poor dear, so you shall simply have to deal through me.”

“Tsk.”

“Miss Chudleigh will be so pleased, Captain!”

“I shall do my best to please her. Who told you where to find me?”

She was taken aback by the suddenness of the question and the hard flat tone in which it was thrust at her. “Lance!”

“No one knew I was here. No one!”

“No one ever need know.”

“You won’t tell me?”

“Ah, does it matter?”

“Yes,” he said, “I think it does.”

“Well,” she said, “I’ll not tell you.” She came to him and put her hands on his shoulders. “Your secrets are quite safe with me, and I’ve given you secrets in exchange. Mayn’t we trust one another?”

He saw that this was true. Certain things about himself might do him no service if circulated in the drawing rooms of the Old City; she, on the other hand, was equally at his mercy.

“As you wish, then.”

“Lance, you’re angry!”

“Perhaps. But then, it matters little; I can serve you just as well angry. ... Wait. I’ll slip down and fetch a carriage.”

“My carriage is waiting.”

“I saw none.”

“No.”

“I’ll go down with you, then.”

She glanced at a gold watch pinned to her bodice. “As you like.” She looked once around the room, once half-anxiously at him, and then preceded him through the door. He handed her down the dark staircase and across the court. Just by the archway outside stood a two-wheeled spring trap of the new style so admired by the hansom-drivers, cursed as they were by carriages swung from leather. Its driver sat silent with his cloak up and his brim down, only a lump of darkness.

“Good-by ...” she whispered. She stepped up to the

trap, but he held her back.

"I don't know your given name, Miss Axelrood!"

She laughed softly. "So you don't. But then, we hardly know one another yet, and it would be unseemly for you to use it." She bent very close and whispered in his ear, "Go back and contemplate thy couch, friend, and think of what the future may bring." And she sprang into the trap, and was gone.

Thoughtfully, he listened to the light swift pounding until it faded into the sleeping sounds of the city, and the sounds of his own breathing, and the creak above him of the Dirty Beast. Then he shook his bewildered head and climbed the stairs to his chamber.

He closed the door behind him and stood musing, contemplating the couch as instructed. And there in the light of the stub of his candle lay the stolen escutcheon, the crest of the Courtenays. He crossed to it and picked it up. Suddenly he laughed. He thought of how, at Blanton House, she had balanced like a bird on the step of his carriage. What had her deft busy hands been at while she spoke to him there in the dark? Yes, she could have reached the 'scutcheon and unbuckled it ... and was it to prove something to him? Was it to give substance to that last strange remark of hers, and had she planned the clever theft after planning the remark? Did all things follow her plans, even to the arrival of her spring trap exactly on time to take her away? Could she plan, to the minute, the length of time it would take her to subjugate a man and set him to her bidding?

She could and she had, and with this carven gift she had proved it to him. And this, he thought, with *very* mixed feelings, must be what old Piggott meant when he warned him against involvement with a ... a natural aptitude at a high degree of training.

But for all its mysteries, the situation contained one great comfort for him: this was no shower of sovereigns from a smiling sky. Miss Axelrood's favors were a *pro quo* which demanded, in its own coin, a *quid* from him. He would pay it, then; and should he shake the tree while picking the promised fruit, let it be their worry and not his; they had let him into their orchard, and they knew where

he was.

Lance Courtenay (or Lancaster Higger-Piggott) laughed and went to bed.

### 3.

THE NIGHT HAD NOT been cool, and the morning was most unseasonable; Lance woke to an unwonted drone of flies and an almost visible reek from the stables directly below. His nostrils twitched and he cursed, and opened his eyes. He closed them again immediately. Daylight, even the dimmest and earliest, is no friend to such cramped, corroded, noisome closets as this one. A single candle had been enough and more than enough for it.

At the thought of the candle he looked at it, spent and spilled in its leaden holder, and then his gaze slid to the tip-crazy chair, half-turned from the littered table, just as she had left it, coming to him. He rolled out of bed and approached it, hearing the drums again faintly. He turned up the mirror, for a mad moment thinking he might see her face in it again, the coppered shadows in the hollows of her shoulders. He laughed then, perhaps at himself, yet a little fondly ... well, he laughed fondly at himself, and began to dress.

He dressed carefully in dun-colored hose and heavy dull shoes with one small pewter buckle each. His linen was clean and very white, but decently frayed; his tuck-waisted coat not too snug and slightly wrinkled. He folded his linen of the night before and the gorgeous waistcoat, and with the burnished silver-buckled shoes, the rich hose and coat, put them in the chest. It was camphorwood, carefully laid in a shell of battered oak; like himself, it looked like a thousand others outside, and concealed its virtues. He locked its two heavy locks with two separate keys from his ring, and then glanced around the room a disgusted once. It could now be opened to chambermaid and prying innkeeper, and be damned to them; they might keep anything they could move.

He took up the Courtenay coach escutcheon, wagged his head admiringly, and set it carefully in the large inside pocket of his coat. He put on the slouched hat, taking care to knock out the last signs of its ever having been tricornered

and cockaded, took up his rough thornwood stick, and descended the stairs.

Grove, the innkeeper, stood in the court, by his very presence drawing the flies from the stable. "Eh, good morrow, Master Lanky!"

Lance gave him the briefest of nods, but Grove was not dismissed. "A word, sir ..."

The "sir" was not lost on Lance, who was quite used to—and satisfied with—Grove's usual form of address, which was no form at all. "Be quick, then," he said coldly, sensing an advantage.

"I've little to say, sir, though 'tis with all my 'eart. ... It might be I've been a mite 'ard on ye, sir, one time or another, for yer reckoning an' that. ... I wanted ye to know I meant nowt; a ninn's a pesty thing to deal with an keeps a body 'alf barmy, ye might say. So for anythin' I might've said in times past, I beg yer 'umble pardon."

"How much did she give you, Grove, a gold sovereign?" Lance snapped.

Grove cringed, which was a sizable feat for a man of his girth. "I didn't want ye angry, sir, an' I 'ad to be sure. I'd not let a stranger into yer rooms, not for—"

"Not for less than a shilling," said Lance acidly. He raised the ferrule of his stick and tapped Grove on the bristly point of his chin. "It's all right this time, but see to it that whatever she bribed you with has purchased your deafness—" *rap!*—"blindness—" *rap!*—"and a total loss of memory."

"Oh, ay, sir, that she did. That she 'as. The very thing I was about to say, sir." He stumbled back from the stick and went blinking and wheezing, ogling and giggling, into the shadows of the stable.

Old swine, Lance thought. I wonder just how much she *did* give him.

He strode smartly down to Abbey Street and along it not quite to the Jamaica Road, keeping close to the center kennel all the way; for though the unusual weather was raising a proper summer flavor from this waterway, it was safer there than by the house fronts and their overhanging first storeys. He came at last to the dangling, legless, tailless horse which marked the sadlery, and turned into the

alehouse next to it.

"Ah there, Mister 'igger-Piggott!"

"Good morrow, Mother Starch." He did not, as did most people, respond to her wide warm smile and ardent little voice; he had learned years ago that her features relaxed into this delighted expression and her diction followed suit, regardless of her feelings. "And 'ow," she beamed, "is poor dear Mr. Barrowbridge today?"

"I haven't been up yet," Lance said. "Do you have a loaf for us this morning?"

"That I 'ave, and my sister's 'usband rode up from Hither Green last night and brought me plover's eggs, if you'd like some."

"I would that. Four, if you have them."

"You can 'ave six. They're right soothing for poor dear Mr. Barrowbridge's aff-flick-shun. Fair rottin' aw'y 'e is. My uncle Neddy 'ad the sime complaint. When their voices go like that they're done for, you may depend," she said happily. "Next thing to look for is a 'orrid great 'ole openin' up on side of the neck 'ere," she went on, touching her throat. "After that 'e might drag on for a year or more but it's all over with 'im." She gave him a luminous smile. "You 'ave tea?"

"Thank you, yes," said Lance, taking some comfort in the fact that Uncle Neddy had not been carried off by leprosy, "but I'll have some fresh water from your cistern. ... Is Scuttle about?"

"Scut-tle!" she yodeled, the two syllables an octave apart. From the shadows of the alehouse came a frightened scrabbling as of startled rodents, and an undersized eight-year-old boy appeared. " 'Ere's that nice Mister 'igger-Piggott wantin' a word wi' ye."

The boy looked at the nice Mister Higger-Piggott without enthusiasm. Lance sat down on a heel and crossed his forearms on the other extended knee, attempting to look friendly. The boy backed away. Lance said, "Have you been up to the offices yet, Scuttle?"

"No, sir, but I'll 'urry an'—"

"Did you know there was a new gypsy caravan in Southwark Park?"

"Please, sir, yus, but I shan't—"

“Would you run down and see them if you could?”

“Ah, sir I’d never—”

“With a silver threepence you wouldn’t?”

Scuttle stared at him and the threepenny bit, dumbfounded. The young barrister’s clerk had not the reputation of extending money, not even to tease. Lance smiled glassily. “We’ll not be needing you at all today. We have to be very quiet and work hard and not see anyone. Here, take this, lad, and push off.”

“Coo,” breathed the child.

“Na,” said Mother Starch chidingly. “A clout i’ the ear’d be better. Gi’ us the thr’p’nce to keep for ye, boy.”

“Fat chance,” said Scuttle courteously, and disappeared into Abbey Street.

“Ah well,” said Mother Starch cheerfully, “Mayhap the gypsies’ll steal him.” She hummed as she took up the eggs carefully in an end of rough sacking and handed him the twisted end. “I’ll step up and empty your slops, later on.”

“Thank you no,” said Lance. “What I can’t do, can wait. Just put these things on Mr. Barrowbridge’s chit.”

“Very well. Take care,” she admonished gaily, “You’re lookin’ very unslept this morning. You’ll be needin’ a nice physic. My dead niece Julia, she ’ad that look about ’er.”

Lance took the loaf and the wine bottle full of water, his eggs and his stick, and navigated the doorway. You’re physic enough, he said, but not aloud. He edged his way up the dark creaking stairway next to the saddle shop and set his burdens down while he manipulated the key.

The establishment of Simon Barrowbridge, Barrister, consisted primarily of a large room with a half-partition. On the entrance side of this were a stool, a settle, and two wooden chairs, with a small writing shelf built to the partition. On the far side was a monstrous desk, a clerk’s table and high stool, and one straight chair “for defendants,” Barrowbridge used to say, the assumption being that plaintiffs would be strong enough to stand. One large window pierced the wall directly behind the desk, and it had been literally years before Lance had realized its function in keeping Barrowbridge’s leonine, pockmarked head in mighty silhouette while light flooded the faces of his interlocutors.

Books covered the walls from floor to ceiling behind the partition, except for one narrow doorway at the rear, which was framed by them. From the other side of this doorway, as Lance entered and turned back for his supplies, came a series of animal chokes, wheezes, gasps, whistles, grunts and sneezes, all of which he ignored.

He closed the door and quietly stepped to the writing shelf, where he took a sheet of foolscap and a heavy marking lead, and lettered busily for a moment: NO CONSULTATIONS TODAY and under it, in flowing script, *Simon Barrowbridge*. This he took outside and pinned at the stair landing where the dim glow from an airhole would fall on it, and returned to the office. He locked the door as silently as the clumsy iron would permit, and started the fire which had been laid, courtesy milord Scuttle, the evening before. He filled the kettle and put it on, looked with distaste at the grey drippings in the iron skillet, shrugged and put it on too, to receive the eggs. All the while the gurglings, sniffings, and half-aspirated whistlings continued from the rear door.

At last he went to it and flung it open. "Good morning, Mr. Barrowbridge, sir."

The room was small, the bed huge. The man who lay on it, curled and dangerous like a wounded bear, glowered at him. "Damn it, Piggy, didn't you hear me? Or are you trying not to? Slide me yon chamber like a good chap."

The convenience in question stood in a closed cabinet in an ancient sideboard by the door. Lance did not even glance in its direction. "Another warm day, sir," he said obsequiously.

The great hulk shifted ominously. "I made a rather simple request, Higger-Piggott." Barrowbridge's voice was not a voice; it was a rasping whisper, edgy, painful to hear and doubtless painful to produce.

Lance said, "Mother Starch had some plover's eggs. I'll have them for you directly, sir."

Barrowbridge thrashed and heaved until he was sitting up. "By gad, sir, I'll get it myself, then," and reached for his chair. His chair was a heavy and richly carved structure, probably one of the few really fine things the old barrister now owned. When placed behind his enormous desk in the



other room, it appeared to be an ordinary chair. It was not. It was equipped with four-inch oaken wheels, the two rear ones skilfully mounted on casters. With these and a heavy walking-stick to scull with, the old man could get around these two rooms with surprising deftness. When he reached for the chair this time, however, it darted away from his grasp and fled to Lance, who had hooked the rung between the front legs with his toe. With an urbane smile he pulled the chair through the door and put it neatly in place behind the desk.

The kettle had begun to sing. Lance ignored the whispered roars from the other room as if they were so much distant surf, and went to find the teapot. As he bent to knock out the old leaves he glanced back and saw the old man taking his heavy cudgel from its resting place by the small window, and laying it along the outside edge of the bed, just covered by the edge of his greasy old comforter.

Lance rinsed out the pot from the water bottle and then filled it with boiling water from the kettle. He put on the lid and covered it with a cosy. "Last night was a great success, sir," he called conversationally. "I think Lady Blanton was pleased with me; she's asked me back. Beauclerk was there, but left early for that dashed club of his; what a man of that finish sees in a grubby lot of hacks and actors, Garrick and Goldsmith and that lot, I can't imagine." He lifted the edge of the tea-cosy and touched the pot briefly with his fingertips. "How can I ever repay you for all you've done?" he asked warmly. "All night long I lay and thought of you, sir, and my great debt to you. You took me from the muck and grime of the stables; you taught me to speak; you taught me law. You have wangled invitations and introductions for me that I never could have had—that I never would have thought you could manage; yet you've done it. How can I repay you—how could I even begin?"

The choked whisper had a suggestion about a piece of furniture, but he ignored it, concentrating on the outside temperature of the teapot. At last it seemed to satisfy him, and he emptied its hot water carefully into the bottle, threw in the tea, filled it from the kettle, replaced cover and cosy, and set it aside to steep. The skillet was all a-crackle now. He broke two eggs into it and contemplated them. "Lady

Blanton asked me, just as I was leaving, if I thought it quite proper for her to have a rather notorious guest in her house. I answered her as you would have, sir, speaking a great deal and committing myself not at all. I must say I was proud of myself; but prouder still of you. It was like having you invisible, there at my elbow, whispering to me from the weight of your years and experience.” This spate of words carried him to the door, where he leaned gracefully, smiling.

Barrowbridge had, for the moment, given up trying to speak. Only because he was watching for it did Lance see the slight motion at the edge of the bed as the barrister’s hand tightened on the concealed stick, the bulge of the monstrous shoulder. Barrowbridge’s legs were useless with scrofula and gout, but those shoulders and heavy arms were to be treated with respect.

Lance smiled his respectful smile and turned away, just out of range. He crossed to the teapot, took down a clean cup, poured a few drops of tea, looked at its color, nodded, poured it full. He sprinkled in a few granules of sugar, lifted the cup and carried it carefully to the back room. He stepped inside so swiftly and smoothly, swung the cup and saucer with his own momentum so carefully, that not a drop spilled as he presented the cup an inch before the old man’s startled face. Years of intimate association had taught him how very much Barrowbridge appreciated the first draught of that first cup of tea in the mornings.

As the pocked nostrils dilated over the steaming cup, Lance bent slightly and twitched the stick away; it clattered to the floor far behind him, in the outer office, like a spent arrow. Barrowbridge’s jaw dropped as he followed it longingly with his eyes. “My goodness,” said Lance, half to himself, gazing into the depths of the cup, “not strong enough after all ...” and, cup and all, retreated to the office.

The sound Barrowbridge made, had he had his own old great bugle of a voice, would have been a wordless scream. It issued, ludicrously, as a sort of yawn. Lance busied himself with the eggs, dipping them out of the skillet on to an earthen plate. He cut bread and arranged it around the eggs and stood a moment to admire the effect. When he reached the door with the plate, Barrowbridge seemed

about to weep. Lance stopped, startled. He had never seen this before. "My *dear* sir!" he exclaimed.

"What in the name of God's got into you, Lanky? What are you doing to me?"

"I? Why—sir ... you are my benefactor, my—Mr. Barrowbridge, I would never ..." He laughed deprecatingly and made a slight gesture with the plate of food. "Doing to you, sir? Preparing a small something to break your fast. Perhaps you don't care for plover's eggs?" he added worriedly.

"Get me the night-mug," said the old man brokenly, pointing at the sideboard, "give me a bite to eat, and then for the love of heaven sit down and tell me what's got into you."

"Oh, I've been thoughtless, I've ..." and Lance hurried to the sideboard. He opened the cabinet briskly, took out the chamber, averted his head, lifted the lid, and let the contents of the plate—bread, eggs, and all—slip into it.

He met the barrister's horror-struck eyes. "Thoughtless," murmured Lance contritely, "and now careless. How can you forgive me?" He then replaced the cover, lifted the object back into the sideboard—"Lanky!" wailed the old man as it disappeared—and firmly closed its door.

"I beg you, an instant's patience, and I'll have more eggs for you," said Lance earnestly, and fairly ran to prepare them. While the eggs were cooking, he went back to lean in the doorway. Barrowbridge was lying back again, with his eyes closed now.

"Interesting matter at law came to my attention last night," Lance said, apparently looking at his fingernails, but actually watching the closed eyes on the bed. They opened, red and agonized. "And it came to me that if anyone might be able to solve it, you could."

"D'ye think I can talk law at a time like this?"

"I think you could talk law at anytime, anywhere," said Lance in tones of pure idolatry.

"Think again," said Barrowbridge, and closed his eyes.

"It is the matter," said Lance precisely, "of Elizabeth Chudleigh, and her desired marriage to the second Duke of Kingston."

All that was puffy, fluid, soft, malleable and subject to change in that massive old face seemed in that instant to disappear, and in its place was a rock carving. The head even sank a little deeper into the pillow, as if it had acquired a new dead weight. For a long breathless moment nothing happened, nothing moved. It was a stasis following which anything—literally anything—might happen, provided only that it was explosive. And the explosion came, in the simple and unbelievable fact that there was none. Barrowbridge opened his eyes and looked at his young protégé, and sighed—softly, gently, barely a breath. Then he whispered, “So ... that’s it.”

Weakly, he tried and failed to wet his lips with the tip of a greyish tongue. “I might have known ... I could have seen ... this is the kind of thing she does so well. What did she do, Lanky, draw you out until she had all my weaknesses before her, and then rehearse you?”

“You do me little credit, sir.”

“Ah, do I, though! ... Well, friend bastard—and I speak precisely—you may be sure I shall not help her, now or at any time. You may faithfully believe this yourself, and you may convey the conviction to your ... new ... owner.”

“But look,” said Lance disgustedly, “I’ve let the yolks cook hard. Ah, Mr. Barrowbridge, there’s a haunting on your breakfast! Ah well, never mind, sir. I’ve still two more eggs. But I’d best eat these myself; you taught me yourself to waste nothing. I’ll be quick, sir; bear with me.” He put the eggs on the plate where the new bread awaited it, drew up the clerk’s high stool to the corner of the big desk that could be seen from the bedroom, fetched the cooling cup of tea he had poured earlier, and composed himself to eat.

There was no sound from the other room. He sipped the tea thoughtfully. He was considerate and did not smack his lips. With the staccato entry of voice-upon-swallow he said, “I saw your notice on the landing, sir. Why did you want no consultations today? Why, anyone who comes will turn away without even reaching the door.”

No answer. Lance cut away egg with his knife and carefully laid the ivory and gold sliver upon a piece of bread. He brought it carefully to his lips and filled his mouth. He ruminated for long enough, swallowed, sipped

tea, and said informatively, "Nice little beggar, that Scuttle. Since we're seeing no clients today I sent him off to see the gypsies, with a silver threepenny. He'll not be in until tomorrow."

Still nothing. Lance wagged his head admiringly. The old chap was tough. Or unconscious. He glanced quickly at that red glare, and nodded. Tough was the word. "Mr. Barrowbridge," he said gently, "I am here in your service, and prepared to discuss the law with you. If you would prefer to be alone, I will as always oblige you." He hurriedly ate up the rest of the egg and bread, and drank the tea down. Then he turned to the open doorway and made an inquisitive sound, raising his eyebrows a great deal and his shoulders a little in the manner attributed to Lord Chesterfield.

Barrowbridge, deep in his pillow, nodded. "Get out, then."

Lance sighed and rose. Crossing and recrossing the office, he got his hat and his coat and his stick. He tidily lifted the kettle from the fireplace and set it on the hearth, poked up the fire and added a stick or two. He covered the bread against the flies, sighed again and went to the door. The door could not be seen from the bedroom. He unlocked it and swung it wide.

"Good-by, sir."

No answer.

Lance stepped over the sill and down on the creaking board which for eleven years had loudly marked every passage in and out of this room. He then stepped back inside again, soft as a cat, and slammed the door. Noisily, he locked it. He then employed two artifices he had been taught by a thief whom Barrowbridge had once defended; one was to bend swiftly and pound the floor with the hardest part of the heels of his hands, in imitation of departing footsteps. (*Th' smallest sound from a foot sounds like a foot; but 'ands, now, they can sound like anything—even a rat, even yerself, out-o-doors and runnin' off. An' ye'll know ye done it right when off they run after ye.*)

The other device was a method of breathing silently in concealment. (*Tip back yer 'ead to give yer neck room, open yer throat like you've just run a league, and go all soft inside.*)

*Yer 'eart 'll pump yer bellows for ye. The scareder ye are the better ye'll pump. It's a trick keeps many o' us poltroons alive.)*

So there he crouched, head back, mouth open like an idiot watching the moon, his fingertips on the floor for balance, his very soul in his ears.

He waited until his left foot was an agony of pins and needles and his right foot was cold. Nothing, and nothing, and ...

A faint sequence of sounds, hushed bleats.

A sudden mighty thrashing, and a series of labored syllables, *uh! uh! uh!*

A muffled crash that set the floorboards jumping, and over and over, the sound of a mulling iron plunged into cool ale.

With a single motion Lance shucked out of hat and coat and bounded to the inner doorway, to be leaning against it, his sleek head on one side, watching with cool curiosity the great broken mound of man on the bedroom floor, one useless leg still across the bed, the other on the floor, the stub-clawed hands spraddling and crab-crawling across toward the sideboard, cheeks aquiver inflating, ashiver collapsing, while lips and nostrils in unison gave forth that great reiterated hiss. Caught up in his own misery, Barrowbridge had obviously let it fill his cosmos, and crept and groveled and slobbered for many seconds before he was aware of the spectator, and then only as a boot in the doorway. He stopped breathing abruptly, for a heartbeat, and then actually reached out and touched Lance's foot with wondering wet fingers. Then, unable to raise himself high enough to look upward, he made a single great convulsion and turned over, presenting his big head to Lance's fascinated gaze upside down, contorted. The brute log of a leg slipped off the bed then, and Lance knew somehow that its bolt of pain broke what had been brought to the breaking point.

"Ah, then, ah-h," he soothed, like a nurse with a babe, "did he fall then, did he. Ah, na, ye're all right now, just let me make ye better, poor thing." His words ceased to be words, just a gentling, as he settled the head to the floor and straightened the legs, got a purchase on the sideboard and heaved the shuddering trunk erect so that Barrowbridge

sat on the floor, as uncertain and all-in-parts as a ten-week infant. Barrowbridge complied like one, helpless in the young man's hands, passive beyond distrust. It was a long while and a mighty job of work before the barrister was comforted and restored to his couch, combed and cleaned, the bed remade, and at last the cup of tea steaming at hand; by then it was Lance who looked the part of the beaten one, that is, until one saw his face.

Barrowbridge had ceased his gasping, or sobbing if that's what it was, for some time now, and lay dully watching Lance work. The first thing he said was all but inaudible, and he had to repeat it twice before Lance understood: "I must sleep now."

"Surely, surely," said Lance, "but you'll answer my question first?"

Barrowbridge moved his head from side to side. It was not a negation, but an expression of weakness, of incapability.

"Come now," Lance urged in his most penetrating *sotto*, accompanied by his most thrumming bass. "I want you to rest, and rest you shall, and I'll watch over you and take care of you. I want no explanations; those I can find for myself. Ah, dear friend, how many times I've seen you sum up a thumb-thick brief with a word of advice: remember Richards, with the ship-lading action? 'Plead guilty,' you said. And Uxham, a shout away from the gallows, two wives, and an unfilled indenture; 'Emigrate,' you said. Give me such a word for Miss Chudleigh, sir, and then sleep."

Barrowbridge flapped his lips weakly, and said a word. It needed saying a number of times; even a familiar one becomes meaningless if repeated often enough, but this one would have been meaningless to him if it had been clearly tattooed on his kneecap.

"Jactitation?" he said at last.

The barrister nodded, and astonishingly, smiled. There was an odd anticipation in the smile, and when Lance began to rise, to plunge into the book-racks in the office, the old man caught his sleeve. With what seemed to be his last atom of energy he nodded to the right of the door, smiled again, and before Lance's eyes, he slept.

Slowly Lance rose and went to the book racks—turning

in amazement to his right instead of left, where the old man's great library of law had most of its body. Surely in those thousands of pages lay his answer; but no, the glance to the right, and that old smile of triumph in his skill, indicated that it was to be found in the esoterica, the little-used collection of what Barrowbridge called, jocosely, 'uncommon law.'

He began to read.



## 4.

HE HAD LONG SINCE completed the last copy of the latest draught of his final excerpt of the laws and procedures of jactitation; it lay under his hand, reduced to two neat sheets. He touched it lightly as he sat watching the sleeper ... or watching the world and all life, with his eyes ready to watch the sleeper when it was time.

What a strange old man, ugly and gruff, gentle, repulsive, brilliant, mad. He wondered if he had ever stopped before to take the measure of Simon Barrowbridge; he thought not. He had set foot on that creaking board by the door for the first time when he was still in his eleventh year. He had reached for the coachman's hand numbly and held to it as if he were dangling from a tree limb forty feet up. Mr. Barrowbridge had seemed wide as a summer cloud, distant as majesty. Old Piggott had doffed his hat and scuffed his boot and said, " 'Ere 'e is, sir," as if he had spoken of him to the barrister before—and indeed he must have done.

"Arghh!" the monster had snorted, looking him up and down. "What's he got to smile about, the little basilisk?" Lanky had not remembered smiling; only the terror, and a black future forever. He would see Piggott again in two hours, but the coachman's parting was almost more than he could bear. He'd have run, but he was rooted; he could not even turn away once he was alone with Barrowbridge. All he could recall now was that endless paralysis while the man stared at him, the great pocked chin a-pucker with derision, the slight contraction about the eyes that might have grown to scornful merriment if he had been significant enough.

And afterwards—

"Sweep, sweat and swot," he murmured now, wagging his head in amazement. What a wringing out, what a starching he had had, those years! If Barrowbridge had not torn off an arm and a leg and tacked them back in their wrong places, it was only because he had not thought of it;

heaven knows he altered everything else. Every move, every thought, every syllable he produced were regarded as Barrowbridge property to be moulded by the Barrowbridge hand. The boy had lived in terror of his ubiquitous cudgel; even then it was becoming difficult for him to move about, and he was marvelously dexterous with the stick, flicking down a book from the shelves, hooking a dish of cold tea across the desk, deftly scratching this or that otherwise inaccessible part of his immense person. Time and again he heard it whistling down on him, only to tug at the hem of his smock as it passed close by. Now he knew what he could not then; Simon Barrowbridge struck no blows with his weapon, save for the single time Lanky had been set upon by street toughs just outside, four against one, and the old chap had come lumbering and wincing down to the street. That was the time to make up for all others! with his baited-bull roaring, thunder on thunder like a king's cannonade, and for each bellow a thwack and a yell from the enemy, until the noise was fit to move the shops back and widen the road; and the erstwhile attackers milling about, smarting so in their backs and shoulders that they did not know which way to run and howled around bumping into one another until the giant tired of the sport and showed them the way with a last hearty flurry. He had said a strange thing just then, panting and watching the street-boys fly away bawling. "A heady thing, to know you're right; it comes seldom."

He crammed his slave with Greek and Latin as he crammed himself with the suety pastys which had now brought him down; and his gospel was the *Oraculo* of Balthazar Gracian. Five thousand times he must have said "Live by Gracian but as you live, quote him not; for these four things will damn him in the modern world"—and the four fat fingers would count them down: "Gracian's a Jesuit and papist ... Gracian's a Spaniard ... Gracian's barely a hundred years dead ... and Gracian's something you know and the other chap doesn't, for which you'd never be forgiven."

So while his contemporaries were learning homiletics, lofty, inapplicable, unattainable, Lancaster Higger-Piggott was marinated in Gracian, who said: *There is always time to*

*add a word, never to withdraw one. Talk as if you were making your will: the fewer words the less litigation. And who said: Never, from sympathy with an unfortunate, involve yourself in his fate. And: The wise do at once what the fool does at last. To command is merely to force men to do what they might do of their own accord. And most often from the lips of Simon Barrowbridge: You must learn to put up with fools.*

Surly, sloppy Barrowbridge instilled in his pupil a macaroni's urge for display and a Gregorian's austerity, and kept him in tight balance between. "Take half the ribands off that hat and make the others dark." He taught him one brandy from another and not to ask for either at the ale-drinkers' table. "The woman was never born who hasn't a beauty about her; you must find it in an instant and tell her. But stay within reason; if she's as tall as your collar don't stand there admiring upward."

"You may act like a fool," he told the boy one day, "any time you know you're acting."

Barrowbridge's practice was a rich one, but in variety only. A barrister needs to know the law; abiding by it is quite another specialty. He could not afford the luxuries of defending only the innocent and supporting only the weak. As the years passed and he became less and less able to travel, his work became more and more advisory and his purse thinner; the best of advice in the hands of the ignorant and the slipshod is worth nothing, and nothing was what he frequently got through the mistakes of others. But in the eyes of the apprentice, much of this was priceless. He would crouch over his tall table and sponge up the sounds of what crossed the master's desk, hearing the probes of legalistics penetrating the fabric of law, hearing how courts common could be brought counter to courts Christian, how cases could be made to fail in the certainty they would be reversed on appeal. He saw many a groat gained through mad demands for a sixpence, and many a fleeced lamb gamboling with such joy that it did not realize it had lost something. He listened amazed to friends here who were enemies in the legal arena, and their strivings to prolong where the fees were high and to bring justice swiftly where they were low.

"You're not to be a barrister," Barrowbridge told Lance

when he was eighteen. It was not a prophecy; it was a command. "You're to be a gentleman. The law's for oxonian sort of chaps who've studied a third as well for twice as long as you have. They've all the chits and certs and thank-you-Dean sort of recommendations, and whether they stand for Parliament or whether they take up landholdings, it doesn't matter to you. You'd never compete with their kind. You couldn't. They have a curl-o'-the-lip way of chatting with people like you, who frighten 'em. 'I say, old man,' he mimicked, 'where did you go to school?' A gentleman does not ask such a thing of you, nor does he inquire of your fortune and family; if you are a gentleman he accepts you. But to be so accepted you must be more perfectly a gentleman than an advocate at the bar must perfectly be an advocate, d'ye follow me?"

The matter of a Courtenay, Earl of Devon, was the product and discovery of Barrowbridge's capacious mind and references. "Given that your ancestry is at present unknown," he said once, "you have taken the first great step toward finding one. To make a Courtenay out of a Smythe one would first have to erase his Smythe-ness. You do not present that difficulty."

So Lance swept and sweated and swotted; in manor houses in Surrey, Hampshire and Berks he watched the gentry secretly from pantry and stable; he shot black-cock and greyhen with gamekeepers whose masters were in the City, and played billiards with City footmen whose masters were shooting grouse. Where the coachman Piggott had not acquaintance and entree into the world of backstairs, Barrowbridge could obtain it at the front door from some young blood, say, whose angry tailor had been placated or counter-threatened, or from some lady whose carelessness had produced results which Barrowbridge had healed. Another youth lounging about was never remarkable; village folk would think he belonged to the manor and the manor staff thought he might be from the village; as to his wide familiarity with houses in town, the gentry never knew. The times were right for such a machination, and the place. It was the wake of the Seven Years' War, a boiling, uncertain, exhilarated, impoverished, expanding time, wherein England was acquiring its empire, merchant-

baronets were beginning to appear in the House, great estates were growing greater or smaller or changing hands. It was a time of comings and goings, of new faces at milady's soiree and strange faces at the London hostels. Boulogne and Calais were handier to the City than Wiltshire and Berks, and young Lance Courtenay was by no means the only person in England who was substituting courtliness and fine linen for a pedigree.

Barrowbridge stirred, and Lance rose instantly to put the kettle on. It was growing dark; he lit a candle and carried it into the bedroom. In the silent way of the sick and the old, Barrowbridge was altogether awake on the instant, and watching him. "How are you, sir?"

"I'm a dead man." He raised his head weakly to look into the other room, and let it fall again. Lance correctly read his wistful hunger: "I've put the kettle on." He straightened the pillow. "You're no more dead than I am."

"Ah, I am. I died there on the floor when ye watched me groveling." He looked up at Lance's contemplative face. "Would you be going ahead with this amusement now, lad? If you plan to, change your plans. Mutilating a corpse is not conduct becoming to a gentleman below the rank of viscount."

"I'll not harm you, sir," Lance said gently.

Barrowbridge grunted and closed his eyes. Though his hands did not move, Lance had the impression he was feeling over his aching body like a man after a bad fall, taking tender inventory. "T'God," he said in his harsh whisper, "I might've laughed at anything from a hot poker to the Iron Maiden, and even borne the bursting of my bowel from that ordeal of the pot you devised. But you had me groveling, ay, and that without laying a hand on me, without speaking any but respectful words." He was not angry. He was examining the events of the morning with an almost admiring detachment.

"God and the wrong parents made me look like a Barbary ape, Lanky, but 'tis I alone who've made a beast of myself; only two people on earth have made a fool of Simon Barrowbridge, and you're the second. Working, I gather," he added, eyes abruptly open and blazing, "for the first."

"Ah, sir! you said that before, and I remarked that you did me little credit. I was instructed by no one."

"All your own idea? Eh! You'll pardon the curiosity of a disembodied spirit—because I insist I'm dead; 'tis the only way I can live with myself now—but if 'twas information you wanted, even to succor mine enemies, why need the request take the form of torture? Or have you been concealing the appetites of that villainous Marquis they're gossiping about these days?"

"May I return your question with a question, sir?"

"Why, that would be in the best tradition of a barrister."

"Thank you. Well then, sir, is it true that you had vowed never to assist Elizabeth Chudleigh in any circumstances?"

"While I lived," the old man nodded. "Further proof of my passing, if any were needed. But go on."

"Then can you think of any way I might have secured this information from you but by doing what I did? Might I have simply asked you and given my simple reason? Or threatened you with that hot poker you have only now derided? Or reasoned with you, or argued?"

"I concede your points, especially the last," said Barrowbridge with the shade of a smile. "And what put that especial method into your surprising young mind?"

Lance smiled in his turn. "Our old comrade in worldliness Balthazar Gracian, where he counsels: *Find out each man's thumbscrew. 'Tis the art of setting their wills in action.*"

"What a viper have I raised in my nest," cried Barrowbridge, and now there was no concealing his rueful admiration. "And have you found your precious information?"

In answer Lance went for his summary of the procedure of jactitation, brought it to the bed, put a second pillow under the barrister's shoulders, adjusted the candle, and then left him to brew the tea.

"Well drawn," said Barrowbridge when he returned a moment later with teapot, sugar and cup. He waved the papers. "And to what end are you giving away this rare gem?"

“To right the injustice of Miss Chudleigh’s situation,” said Lance pompously, and enjoyed the amazement which grew on the other’s face, and enjoyed even more the glee which replaced it when he added, “And I’m too much your disciple to be giving anything away.”

The tea was poured by now; he took it and sipped with noisy gratification. “Now then—” he murmured as he sipped and pondered, and again, “N-n-ow—” sure outward signs of his mighty mind at work. Lance stood by silently, waiting.

“In my shriven state,” hissed the old man at length, “as I lie here dead and released from the pettiness and paucity of man’s lot on earth, it comes to me that my long bitterness toward that lady is ... unworthy. Notice, lad, I don’t say ‘unjustified.’ Never that; but the depth of my rancor, and its long tenure—those are unworthy. True to the code of a gentleman, you have not asked me the cause of this—ah—disaffection of mine in regard to the lady. True to the instincts of a soul in purgatory, I shall tell you. It is a sad tale and reflects little credit on anyone concerned; but then, it’s a confession, and well due you, my executioner. In addition, you have set yourself a perilous course through the very heart of a jungle of which you have as yet traversed only the margins.”

“But, sir, I—”

“*Hush!* and listen,” the barrister snapped. “I am writhing in embarrassment and chagrin at the very contemplation of an episode I have concealed, even from myself, for twenty years. You have reduced me to a prideless fraction of my former self, and I very much doubt I shall ever have the fortitude to begin this tale again.”

Lance ostentatiously placed both hands tight over his mouth and sat down to listen.

I said twenty years [he began] and I couldn’t be more precise. It was 1749, just this early in the year and, now that I think on’t, as unseasonably warm. I’d wintered well, in Majorca—this was before Admiral Byng gave it away to the French, and it was pleasant and peaceful, and the task I had there pleased me and was successful; I’ll not add it to my story just now because it was skullduggery; because it does not concern the matter in hand; and because I won’t

spoil the telling of it one day when it is germane. You should know only that the law was but a piece of my career in the early days; I performed what one might call confidential repair work on broken things—vows, hearts, contracts and consciences. I returned to England pleased with myself, settled with my tailor for the first time in twelve years, and took a little house in Jermyn Street.

I shall not say I had a reputation for efficiency, because a reputation implies wide public knowledge, and an element in my efficiency was the very absence of renown. For the handling of matters such as the return of embarrassing letters, or the gathering of evidence to transform ‘potential’ to ‘putative’ paternity, one does not insert a public notice in the *Monthly Review*. (Don’t raise your eyebrows at me, lad! My standards were high; I never undertook an assignment not in the interests of justice, though I’ll confess to the use of my clients’ definition of the word.)

Ah—where were we? High standards? Ah yes! I had a bit of capital, you see, my health, and a bit of leisure, so I could pick and choose. I accepted only those assignments which I could positively fulfill. Clients who were turned away went elsewhere and forgot me; clients whom I served were satisfied and sent me others. As a result I actually was known, for a certain period, as a man who made no errors. My promise was as good as anyone’s oath, and because I succeeded in everything I undertook, many believed I would succeed in *anything* I undertook. And perhaps I had begun to believe that too, else I should have excused myself from my drawing room the instant Elizabeth Chudleigh entered it. But I did not, and I was undone.

Na! I am shriving myself. Prosperity was my undoing quite as much, or I might have demanded a ... a more negotiable fee than the one I exacted. Complacency was my undoing, for I had ample warning that Miss Chudleigh was not to be dealt with as just another client. And perhaps the old Adam undid me most of all.

I wish you could have seen her then! They tell me she is still a splendid-looking woman, but in those days, those days ... imagine first her clothing, a bottle-green gown with a little cape, a strange hat close to the brow and flaring out behind to frame her face with a green darker than the dress



—almost black. Now in my time I've observed many an artifice for the entrapment of the unwary, and have devised not a few; I yield the palm to few men, but with all my heart, to any woman, I do. They come by it untaught and reach excellence by instinct; and like a green shoot, they'll break rocks to accomplish it, however tender they be.

A long time had passed since the scandalous episode of the costume ball at the Venetian Embassy—five years at least, and she had used them as well as they had her. Then, she made such an extreme of forwardness that it looked like innocence. Here in my drawing room she was so modest in appearance, so decorous in mien, so foiled in gentility, that the whore in her flamed out like a diamond.

She had a flawlessness about her—skin that mud wouldn't stick to (as she's often enough proven, the many times it's been thrown at her) and a child's mouth, and arches to her brows barely turned, like the flat steady wings of birds that soar. But I don't want to tell you she was a beautiful woman. ... or perhaps she was; but if she was, no beautiful woman had ever looked like her before. Her lips said what she wished them to say; her eyes demanded openly to know what a man had, and how soon he intended to use it. Ah ... and I was a shade under forty and I had my health, I had my health.

She paid me the compliment of taking no precautions, exacting no confidence, and telling no lies. She made it clear by these omissions that she knew who I was, I knew who she was, and that, being what we both were, we could work together or we could not once the facts were out.

She told me as soon as I had seated her that she was married to young Augustus John Hervey, brother of the second Earl of Bristol; that the marriage had been secret and was unsatisfactory, and that they had been living apart for nearly five years. Nevertheless, recent news from Ickworth in Suffolk had given her to think.

It seemed that George William Hervey, the Earl, lay even now in Ickworth aflame with fever and his life was feared for; should he be taken, her husband would inherit the title and the estates. Married, she would be a countess, and either remain one or draw off a reasonable weight of Bristol treasure as the price of a divorce or annulment. But

of her marriage to this young gentleman there was no record; the curate who had done the thing had taken a large contribution for his little church in exchange for a lapse of memory in this matter. He was now dead, as was the village idiot who witnessed the midnight ceremony. Probably a thousand people knew of this wedding; fifty thousand had guessed; no living soul except the principals could swear they saw it done, and one of them might not.

Could this marriage, valid in the sight of God, Church, and common law, be entered quietly in the parish records?

I asked her where, and exactly when the marriage had taken place, and then I thought a bit while she waited with her face asleep and her eyes alive. Presently I asked her what she would do if the Earl recovered—he was, after all, only three years older than his brother—and thereafter outlived Methuselah? You see, I had known for some time that this remarkable creature was the mistress of the Duke of Kingston. The future cannot be foretold, I said to her, but in a measure it can be controlled. One may eliminate things from it as one can never do with the past. Might it not be possible that one day she would regret the existence of the written record?

I think that troubled her, but only for a moment, for she smiled at me. It must have been then that I decided to make a fool of myself; say rather, to permit her to do so. She smiled and said, “I understand you can repair anything, any time, if the price is right. If one day I needed to rid myself of this evidence again, might you manage it? For the only circumstance I can imagine which would make that desirable would entail a ... sizable advancement.” And I knew she was thinking, even then, of one day being the Duchess of Kingston, though her hopes were not great.

I said no; the evidence must stand, once in; getting it out again would be a mutilation too difficult to conceal. On the other hand, I said, I had run across some surprising information which would apply to that circumstance. Now, that’s all I said about it and it was true. She believed me and she believes to this day that I know a way to erase that irritating union with Augustus Hervey who, by the way, has still not inherited, and is still an officer in his Majesty’s Navy as he was the day she met him, though rather higher

up.

In any case, she totted up the risks in an instant, and then laughed. She has a shrewdness which surpasses intelligence and an intuition which is wiser than wisdom. "I *must* have the Hervey marriage just now," she said, and, "I *might like* another later. Let us be dutiful then and do what we must. Later, when the circumstance arises, we can consider the other."

"Very well," I said, "I'll rush off to your little lost village and see that your little lost marriage is recorded. There's only one more thing to discuss, and I'm off, praying the good Earl lives the week out. I shouldn't like him to predecease our plans."

"One more thing?" says she, and, "Oh, of course; the fee."

"The fee." I looked at her until she—even she!—must drop her eye.

"Will it be much?" she asked me; and for reasons I can't clearly explain, that was the most hilarious thing I had ever heard; I came out with a big inexcusable boom of a laugh. I told her that I could not possibly answer such a question; and then like a fool I laughed again. I do not think women enjoy being laughed at. When I could, I said, "You have the payment with you this minute, Miss Chudleigh."

She stood up. She understood immediately and completely. She said without hesitation, "Very well, then. Have you a ... preference as to the time of ... payment, and the place?"

"I have," says I, "but I will gladly accept yours."

She inclined her head politely, and I know she hated me with all her heart. But smooth as butter, she promised, "Within a week after the task is done, on grounds I shall choose. Without witnesses, of course."

There seemed to be nothing to say to that. I opened the door to show her out. She glided through and, in the foyer, with her back to me and her body unmoving, she said softly, "Just once."

I said, "Why, of course, milady. Just once."

She bowed her head and left my house.

## 5.

“WHAT IS IT, SIR?” said Lance, bending over the bed solicitously.

Barrowbridge kept his eyes closed, but some of the pain left his face. “Nothing. My tea’s cold.”

Lance looked at him for a long moment and said, “Why are you telling me this unhappy tale?”

“What? What?” Barrowbridge blinked up at him. “Why—I’ve told you. For my sake, because ultimately a man must confess to himself the stature of his follies. For your sake, because you must be warned. I smell it in the breeze, in the tack you’ve taken. ... You *have* set a course, eh? I’d not be able to dissuade you from it?”

Respectfully but firmly, Lance agreed.

Barrowbridge shrugged. “There you are, then. If you will not avoid the enemy you must know him.”

“Or join him,” Lance amended, and smiled.

“Ah, well, well,” huffed the old man, “yes, there’s that. But then you must know him even better, eh?”

“I’ll put the kettle on,” said Lance. “And I think I’ll nip down while it’s boiling and send the boy ’round to fetch Piggott and the carriage. Have I your leave?”

Barrowbridge looked at him with amusement. “You please me, boy; you do indeed. ...You need my permission about as urgently as you need my scrofula, and well you know it. And you know I know it. Na, what you’re saying is that if I’ve a yarn to spin, I’d best get on with it and be done, because you want to be on your way to Lady Blanton’s. I read you well, lad, I read you well. Mind that you never let another human being read you as I do.”

“I’ll put the kettle on,” said Lance again, and went out

“And did you do the task?” asked Lance, when they were settled again.

“That I did. The church was at Lainston in Hampshire, and if you’ve never heard of Lainston you’re no different

from me twenty years ago. I rode to Aldershot the very day Miss Chudleigh visited me, slept at an inn, and was off for Lainston early in the morning. I recall it like a bad dream; I needn't tell you that my life's works have mostly been accomplished at the other end of my spine, and riding a mazurka-gaited hirehorse at a canter for most of two days did little for my good humor. I remember missing the track a number of times, once to find myself face to face with a fingerboard directing me to Nether Wallop, I give you my word! I wheeled and walloped away from there.

"Lainston's not far from Winchester, and close by the River Itchen; yet once there you'd believe yourself on another planet, or at least in another age. The church is one of those English indestructibles, where the New Chancel was put in *Anno Domini* 943 and the rest of the building was flung up by the mound-builders. The living must bring the curate all of four pounds per annum.

"I found him in the churchyard on his four bones, pulling weeds. He was a saint-faced youngster with eyes all watery from years of staring at irregular Hebrew verbs. I came up at a gallop and wheeled my mount and slid off all dusty and grim. I identified myself briskly as Lascombe, Exemplification Officer of the Prothonotary's Office, Cantab., jingled my fobs in his face, and demanded to know if his parish register had been monished."

Lance straightened up. " 'Monished?' "

"A word I'd invented on the way down. It smacks of correction and punishment, and it seemed to me to sound like a word one ought to know."

"So it does."

"It did to him, poor chap. 'Oh dear,' says he in that dove-coo which so often results from the mixture of goat-cheese with scholarship. 'Why,' says he, 'I don't—I can't—oh dear.' So I marched him to his little sacristy and had him take down the registers for the past fifty years, telling him sternly, 'A third of the registers in England remain unmonished, and the Bishop is not pleased.' 'Oh dear,' he coos, and off I send him to his weeds with the faithful promise I'll have every book monished good as new by noon. So off he went, grateful as can be. The rest was simple; I'd four phials of ink with me, all different and

ready to be used or blended, and a dozen quills sharpened a dozen ways. Luck gave me a blank half-page just where I wanted it, and there in what I flatter myself is the old vicar's hand, with what is indistinguishably his own quill, I put the entry of August 12, 1744, Augustus John Hervey and Elizabeth Chudleigh; and there it stands, I'm sure, to this very day.

"I sent my compliments and the news over to Miss Chudleigh as soon as I returned, and spent most of the next four days plucking the hairs out of my nostrils and reblocking my wig, and kindred activities. At length a boy came with the message: 'I'm to say the word "Lainston," and you're to come with me,' and I had my horse brought and followed the boy on his ancient white mare. The boy spoke never a word until we reached the edge of Kensal Green, where in those days an old livery stood. It was deserted but not abandoned, a tight old structure which has since burned down, doubtless from the burning shame I carried at the thought of it.

"The boy then said, 'You're to wait here,' and rode off down Harrow Road, and that was the last I saw of him. I dismounted and stood in the gloom—it was after teatime and growing dark—feeling that I must be the only illuminated thing in the dark landscape, ay, and with all my intentions lit up for the world to read as well; and then I began to feel as if I'd been made the butt of a joke, and would be left standing here until St. Swithin's Eve. But I heard a tapping, and stood off from the building to look up at it, and there in a bit of a round window in the upper storey I saw a fluttering of white handkerchief. I led my horse around the building and tied him in an ell away from the road, and tried doors until I found one which yielded. I stood blinking inside until I became aware of a horn lantern standing on the floor making a little ring of dim light on the boards at the foot of a ladder.

"Lance, Lance, I'd not be recalling all these details, or relating them, if it were easy to think of what followed!

"So up I went to milady's boudoir, and it was a dusty feed-store; and there was milady, barely to be discerned, and her peignoir was a riding-habit, stiff and high-necked with a great covering skirt, and her scented couch a mass of

straw with a clean horse-blanket thrown across it. Her act of welcome was a single billow of the habit, which readied her; her word of love was, "Go on, then," in a flat, cold voice.

"No gentleman could have proceeded from that point. No gentleman, for that matter, would have found himself in such a circumstance. I, however, was not and am not a gentleman; and proceed I did, shambling and self-aware like a schoolboy taking a dare.

"It was a chilling experience. I had not, of course, expected ardency ... *wait*, lad, I am lying to both of us. I *had* expected ardency; everything I am, everything I came from, quivers in awareness of its low station, and this very lowliness demanded a response. Failing ardency, I suppose distaste would have been a response. Fear would have been a response. Disgust, nausea, terror ... anything; but there was *no* response.

"It ended because I could bear that no longer and for no other reason, d'ye follow me? I knelt there a-nostriling out my temper like a foundered horse while she calmly rose, a simple act which, unassisted, dressed her decently for the street. I saw her moving toward the ladder, and gasped out that she must wait.

"She stopped and waited. 'Certainly, Barrowbridge,' says she. It had been "Mr." Barrowbridge at our first meeting.

"I pulled myself together and got straightened up and went to her. 'We made a bargain,' I told her. I fear I let myself be angry; what is it Balthazar says about anger?"

"*It is most difficult to halt while running at the double,*" Lance quoted.

"True enough; but I was thinking of *Every onset of passion is a digression from rational conduct. That's* the one I proved that day, ay, and like a student with a theorem, gave proof of my proof. So like a farmer haggling over a cracked pot at the Haymarket, 'We made a bargain,' says I.

" 'We kept it,' says she.

" 'What—*that?*' says I, in a rage.

" 'Just so,' says she, and the first I know I'm advancing on her is when she sets the lash of her riding-crop against my breastbone. Did you know you can hold back a man

three times your weight that way? 'Listen to me, Barrowbridge,' she says in a voice like hailstones melting in the back of your collar, 'I'll deign to explain myself to you once, but once only. 'Twas yourself who made this act a matter of commerce, not I. You named the price, and you collected. What else you expected I neither know nor care; I am morally certain, however,' she says, 'that when you spend a sixpence for a purchase you pay out the money itself and do not wrap the coin in cloth o' gold. You'd no right to ask anything more than the price you set. You'd little right to ask even that of a desperate client who could get help nowhere else and wouldn't have the time to if there were another place. As to the—transaction itself, any simpleton knows that if I buy Mary's radishes, I want her radishes more than I do my money, else I shouldn't buy; she in turn wants my money more than she wants her radishes. In any trade I want to get a bit more than I give; in this —'She nods towards the horse-blanket—'I could get nothing from you. I had then no choice but to give—less than nothing.'

"Then you confess you had me to Lainston and back for nothing!" I bellowed at her.

" 'I so confess,' she says, with a glint in her eye. 'I did it because I thought of a way, even as you would happily take anything I have without paying anything important for it. But you can't think how to do it. Take care,' she says suddenly; she must have seen something in my face, for by then I was fair livid, 'I warn you, Barrowbridge, take care. We have had one interchange; I call us even-up, and you're bellowing in pain. Do anything else to me and we'll be even again on the instant, with you bellowing louder. That will happen and happen until you agree with me on what even-up means.' "

"Lance, did ye ever see a great hulking ox of a fellow going about all day knocking littler men about, just to prove he's a great hulking ox? So it is with the behavior of fools, who can be depended upon for a greater folly each time someone proves them foolish.

"I patted aside her riding crop and went for her; I confess it, I lifted this hand to a woman. Lift it? I made a cannon of myself and fired the fist at her like an iron ball."



Barrowbridge lay breathing hard; then, "And she wasn't there," he whispered, his face echoing the exact amazement of that long-gone day. "She melted away into the shadows at the side—and head-first, down the ladderhole I went. My hand clawed a moment at the nigh edge, but she must have been waiting for just that, for she fetched me such a lick with the crop on the back of that hand that she took out a piece the size of a Dutch dollar.

"Next I knew I was opening my eyes on her as she bent near me and took up the lanthorn. We were on the ground floor, she composed as a cantata and I a-sprawl and broken on the boards. 'It's even-up again, Barrowbridge,' she tells me sweetly, 'and you've nothing to fear. But—make no other gesture, or you'll have the like of this again. And again after that, if you're fool enough, world without end.'" And she blew out the light; I heard the split-door open and close quietly, and then I do believe I fainted."

Lance made a soft noise that was not a word. "Small wonder you wanted to warn me."

"I've told ye only the first part, the smallest!" croaked the old man. "Ah, lad—never fear; I'll not keep you all night with the rest of it. The rest took longer, but takes less telling.

"When I was up and about with a chip out of my pelvis (and who's to know how much that contributed to my present state as the years got to it?) and had a dislocated wrist in order again, I was not a well man, and vowed I would not be until I taught Elizabeth Chudleigh what *I* took 'even-up' to mean.

"I had one thing with which to belabor her, and that was the task I'd fulfilled at Lainston. I'd not dare to mention that, of course, and involve myself; but the facts behind it—the marriage itself—that could trouble her a great deal, especially now that the sick earl was well. You go about waving proofs of things held secret, and you'll cause trouble; this truism applies as well to open secrets.

"I made a short list of influential folk—clerks to M.P.'s, nameless folk who had the ear of the Church, and the like, and made the rounds with my authenticated rumor: Elizabeth Chudleigh was indeed wed to Augustus John Hervey. It would spread and widen, and at length some

enemy she had would take the trouble to go to Lainston and see the records, and the rumor would be truth, and the whole structure she had built would totter.

“Or so I deluded myself.

“On the first day of this campaign I passed the word to four people. On the second day I went to a chap called St. George, who’s a printer in the firm which does the *Monthly Review*, and gave him my item, being quite sure he’d pass it along to someone in The Club. ‘Ah yes,’ says he, ‘not an hour ago another chap was in here with proof positive she wed young Pulteney, Earl of Bath, four years ago,’ and laughs in my face. Not a little taken aback, I trotted around to the Fish and Staff on Fleet Street, where so many great of the time dined, and had a word with the innkeeper. Yes, he’d heard my tale of Bristol’s brother; he’d heard it, matter of fact, four times since last midnight; two people had told him the same about Bath, and there was a powerful rumor about that the Duke of Hamilton, who had been a great admirer of Elizabeth Chudleigh in the early days, had married her as well.

“I ran about London like a zealot with an end-of-the-world revelation, wild-eyed and laughed-at. It came to me far too late that Elizabeth Chudleigh, with twenty times the resources I could command, ten times the vindictiveness, and (I now confess it) twice the intelligence, was spreading my story for me, thirteen to the dozen, until it became an old joke, an absurdity; and for good measure she was spreading yarns about others as well, so no one would know what to believe.

“The following day I received a letter from her. It was unsigned, but it was unquestionably hers. It said only, *En garde!* in cheerful script; and while I stood there turning it over in my hands and wondering what it was I must be on guard against, a great hairy bailiff came whacking at my door with the news that my lease had been held invalid and I must vacate. Even the extent of my knowledge of the technicalities of rental could not save the situation, and out I went. I settled again soon elsewhere—four ruddy times I settled again, but there was no escaping the implacable pursuit. There was nothing to connect her with any of it, and nothing was ever done past the bounds of profound

nuisance. But so many things, so many different things! I'll swear she was responsible for a basket of rotten eggs delivered to me one day, and another delivery—would you believe it—a pack of hunting dogs, howling and hungry, ordered by someone who had forged my signature; ay, and the statement with them, sixty-eight pounds twelve and six, payable on the spot.

"Removing so abruptly made it nigh impossible for clients to find me; those who did began to slip away, usually for reasons not divulged to me. They simply did not return. I collared one on the street one day, a chap who was attempting an action to keep his brother out of debtor's prison for eighteen pounds. Someone had given him eighteen pounds—a simple device.

"So came I to Bermondsey, in this muck and mud; and not long afterwards I received another of the short cheerful missives: *Even-up again*, it said, and thereafter she let me be."

"A witch."

"A cheerful witch," Barrowbridge agreed. "A joyous, cheerful, resourceful and unforgiving witch. This I'll say of her: she gives warning and she announces surcease, and sticks by both. I think it's a matter of principle.

"Now then, I've said my say; I've bared my soul and, I trust, warned you sufficiently. I wish I could say I've warned you away altogether, but I can see I have not."

"As usual," said Lance reverently, "you are quite right, sir."

Barrowbridge laughed at him, "Damn you," he said affectionately. "Now tell me, Lanky, what you've planned for her. Mayhap I can be of some assistance."

"Would you, sir? Would you really? Even if it helped her?"

The old man looked up at him gravely. "'Twas more than a quip, Lanky, when I told you of my death. I'm a hulk now, helpless in this bed and on that chair; I've known these past twelve months or more that I've overstayed my tenure at the head of this organization of ours. I'd never ask you for a pension and you'd be a fool to give it to me. I've made you earn your porridge twice over; you've every right to expect the same of me. I can no longer do anything for

myself by commanding you; you can, I think, do a great deal for yourself by commanding me."

"Ah, *sir!*" cried Lance, quite overcome.

"Before you make that fine straight spine of yours all soggy with an excess of emotion," said the old man acidly, "let me add that with the death of my dignity, a number of other qualities are now deceased, most notably my foolishness. At long last freed from that lifelong curse, I may say here and now that I am no longer a fool, and I know clearly that the instant I become a hindrance to you, you'll drop me like a hot brick."

"Never!"

"Nonsense, boy! 'Tis the way I raised ye, and the way I want ye to be. Now, to work. Tell me your plans."

At the top of the High Street, Southwark, Piggott wheeled to the side and stopped. He opened the boot, found the folded cloak and tossed it to his pensive passenger, "'ere's the bridge, Lanky, and 'igh time the bug become a butterfly."

Silently Lance shucked out of his drab covering and took the fine cloak. He handed up the old one, rather obviously leaving it for Piggott to fold. Piggott did, and put it away. "Want the 'scutcheon? Or is one alone worse'n none?"

Lance seemed not to hear him, but sat looking out across the dark Thames. He felt exceeding strange, and had been silent and troubled since he had put the old barrister to sleep and gone to his inn to change. The day had been an eventful one, full of victories for itself and possibilities for the morrow, but in this hiatus he was plagued by doubts. The doubts did not go too deep; his inner confidence was that he would command the situation he was coming to as he had the one he had left.

What manner of woman yielded up her supposed utmost with such cold casualness as this—this witch? There was a moralistic response to such a question, of course, but it would derive from a code, and a code is a cipher, a set, fixed attitude to be manipulated without thought. Detachedly he set aside prejudice and looked simply at sequences of action.

The classical conduct of women was to withhold the ultimate as a reward; romance and respectability aside, that was the sum and substance of the interaction between men and women. The theory seemed to be, at its baldest, that the woman who yields is thenceforward without resources, and that therefore it is to her advantage to promise and withhold as long as the revenue continues. Elizabeth Chudleigh's vivid history might be a demonstration of this principle at work, unless one had Barrowbridge's extraordinary tale to measure it against; with that, one could wonder if she had used that erstwhile ultimate again as punishment instead of reward, as ... how many ways might she have used it?

"*Blarst* thee, lad! If ye don't want to talk to me at all, ye could say so an' I'll stop makin' a fool o' meself."

"Wh—what's that?" Lance had a long way to come out of his thoughts, and did it slowly.

"I'm asking d'ye want the ruddy 'scutcheon on the one side. If ye don't want to gab wi' me ye could nod yer bleedin' 'ead."

Slowly Lance reached into his great-pocket and drew out the missing escutcheon. Wall-eyed, Piggott took it. "Ye've 'ad a new ... coo, it's the same one. Lanky, where—"

"Buckle 'em on," said Lance testily. The feel of the carved wood in his hand had brought back his conjectures with a rush, and he needed to be with them. The escutcheon meant Miss Axelrood, and the thought of Miss Axelrood proved to him that in fumbling through the moral wilderness of Miss Chudleigh's acts, it had not been Miss Chudleigh he had been thinking about at all.

He had been quite ready to accept the fact that Miss Axelrood's visit had not been prompted *only* by his personal magnetism; he found now, rather to his surprise, that he had been clinging to the idea that some of her conduct at least had been the result of some such feeling.

He gave her the same test he had made Barrowbridge apply: could she have secured the desired results in any other way?

He rebuilt the situation in his mind accordingly, seeing her make her plea on Miss Chudleigh's behalf without the accompanying intimacies, and he dourly confessed to

himself that she would have failed.

And this is the route through which he reached a real understanding of his good fortune in having Barrowbridge as his personal tactician. Ay, and here was Miss Axelrood with just such a mentor. He visualized, in a mad vivid flash, Miss Chudleigh, dressed scandalously as at the legendary ball, and Mr. Barrowbridge, dressed mythically in whatever might denote an Exemplification Officer of the Prothonotary's Office, Cantab., saluting one another with foils, prepared to fence. And one foil was a nameless bastard who wished only to climb and climb until he came to the level from which he had been so cruelly dropped, and the other foil was an incalculable damsel whose dream it was merely to climb and climb.

He shook himself violently; he was unsuited and unaccustomed to having visions. He found himself face to face with the coachman, who, having attached the insignes, was leaning over the step and staring into his face like one trying to identify a sleeping stranger. "Dash it all, Piggott," snapped Lance, "you've been eating raw onions."

"Shallots," corrected Piggott. "You *are* in a 'appy frame, I must say."

Lance glared at him, and the coachman glared right back. There was no quailing this time, as the chemical of terror was lacking in the younger man, and his mien was only irritated and irritating. But with the contact he came at last to the here and now; to Piggott, the shape of Piggott and Piggott's function in his life and in this particular episode in it.

He recalled the coachman's discursive warning, all the way through Southwark and Bermondsey, last night, against Miss Axelrood, and how timely his estimates of Miss Chudleigh had been. Coincidence? Possibly; Piggott's interests were catholic and his monologues could treat with anything—why not this? Then in the same instant in which this facile excuse came to him, he rejected it. There comes a time in the affairs of a man when complications overwhelm him, and he can abide no more mysteries. In the past twenty-four hours he had been through enough, accomplished enough, to drain anyone of psychic energy—and he had at least as exhausting an occasion before him.

He had no resources to waste on tact or reasoning in the matter of minor mysteries. All this overload came out in a steel-edged tone, and the words he flung in the coachman's face: "So you don't know who stole the 'scutcheon?"

"I don't know 'oo stole the 'scutcheon?" snarled the coachman, giving an accurate, though cockneyed, mimicry. "Now don't be tellin' me yer 'ighness is raisin' 'is ruddy gall-bladder over a rotten little piece o' wood. Besides ye got it back, so what's the muckin' loss? 'oo 'ad it, any'ow?"

"Miss Axelrood had it. She unbuckled it standing right there on the step last night, right under our noses."

"Now there's a sly little package! I never guessed."

"I believe that, Piggott. I also believe it to be your only innocence in the matter."

"'Ow's that?" demanded Piggott, cocking his head as if to hear better.

"I'll not fence with you at all," said Lance sharply. "I charge you with having disclosed my address to a stranger, and with it all my affairs. I charge you with risking my safety and my future for less than Judas got, without the Iscariot excuse of not fully knowing what he was about."

"I don't know what ye're maunderin' about and I doubt ye do yourself."

"Then I'll make it clear," said Lance, angry and weary. "Miss Axelrood was at the inn, inside my room, waiting for me when I got there last night. The only other person who could conceivably have told her where I was is Simon Barrowbridge, and I have excellent reasons for believing him innocent. How much did she give you, Piggott? It must have been a good bit. Grove had two gold sovereigns for his part in it."

"She was *there*? Afore us?"

"Ah, come off it!" said Lance disgustedly. "Yes, she came by Westminster Bridge in a spring trap with a fine black gelding while you crept through Southwark talking filth and not minding your business. Now if you're willing, drive me to Lady Blanton's. If you're not I'll take a hackney. Which is it?"

Piggott stepped back to the curb. Surprisingly, his anger seemed to have evaporated in favor of a wonderful amaze. "Lanky, ye've an evil way of jokin' a man."

"Will you do one thing or the other?" Lance spat out. "I've found you out and I will not talk about it—not a word!" and with that he plumped back in his seat and folded his arms.

Piggott opened his mouth to speak and closed it again. He still, Lance noticed out of the corner of his eye, affected this posture of astonishment. He was not impressed. He had frequently seen Barrowbridge rehearsing a client in something of the sort.

Piggott turned to scan the black river and then the bridge. A hackney was clopping toward them out of London Town; the sight of it seemed to stir Piggott into decision, for he snorted and sprang up, whipped the horses so that the near one reared, hitting the traces a frightful jolt. Then they were rumbling across the bridge. Lance braced his legs and set his jaw against the jolting, and let his anger bubble in his blood. He found himself enjoying it. He wondered if this enjoyment was what old Barrowbridge had meant, so long ago, when he said, "A heady thing, to know you're right; it comes seldom."

Not a word was said between them until they reached a point a few yards from Clerkenwell Road in Holborn, and perhaps a quarter-mile from Blanton House. And there the carriage stopped.

"Well?" cried Lance, testy as a dowager.

Piggott leaned close. "Now you listen 'ere to me, laddy-buck. I'm goin' to speak the entire bloody truth, an' if ye don't believe it I got no more to say, now—or—*ever*."

"Very well. If it's the truth. If not, don't bother."

"It's the truth. And that is, I never told nobody nothing about you. I never saw a farthin' from a livin' soul for informin', especially not for informin' on you; I 'aven't and I wouldn't. What's goin' to 'appen to the pair of us now I 'aven't thought out yet but I will; but ye bloody better well know what's the truth when ye 'ear it, and that's my last word."

"Take me to Blanton House," said Lance disgustedly.

Piggott did, sitting very straight, a far more decent figure furious than he ever had been before.

At Blanton House, Lance waited for the final rumble of his wheels to cease and then stood abruptly. In a soft,



intense voice, designed to be inaudible to the Blanton footmen, he said to Piggott: "You've this much latitude, old man. Sit and think over the whole childish story while I'm inside. If by the time I come out—an hour, perhaps—you are prepared to tell me that you did what I've charged you with; *why* you did it; and what you expect to do to make amends—well then, I can decide what to do with you. But if you persist in flying in the face of reason and evidence, then simply don't *be* here when I come out. I shall never want to see your face again."

Piggott neither moved nor spoke. Lance alighted and ran up the steps. When he was admitted and the doors closed behind him, Piggott bowed his head. He sat without moving for a very long time.

## 6.

"MISS AXELROOD, PENDLETON."

"Yes, Captain. I'll see if she's at home."

"Come here."

"Yes, sir?"

"If Miss Axelrood is not at home, I shall wait. If Miss Axelrood says she is not at home, she shall not see me again."

"Yes, sir. Will you wait in the library?"

Lance strode across the great foyer to the double doors of the famous Blanton library. Walking from the hall was like coming in from outdoors; the open space there, with its great double staircase and arched skylights, made one totally unprepared for the library. It was a wide room, but the ceiling was so low that tall men habitually leaned with their hands easily on the beams overhead. Its décor was a luminous dark green and cream—and books, books from floor to ceiling save for doors, windows and fireplace; books in a star-shaped rack free of the wall, books in racks angling out and back from the wall; there were coves, caves, nooks of books. Lance walked softly among them, occasionally touching morocco, calfskin, ivory inlay on the backs of books. He quickly learned their arrangement—they were beautifully organized—and with the greatest pleasure, stopped before as complete a little library of law as the most exacting barrister might wish.

One title in it made him laugh. He put out his hand for it, then checked himself. Time enough for that later.

"He sends me fierce messages by the butler," said Miss Axelrood from the door, "and I find him in the shadows laughing like a wicked imp. You quite frighten me, Captain."

In her blush-pink velvet she looked anything but frightened. He caught her hand and kissed the wrist, then, holding it, he put out his other hand to touch the lobe of her strange ear. She stood quite still at this, her welcoming smile still on her face, neither responding nor repulsing.

This reminded him of something which he chased from his mind before it could be identified. Faced with control of that high order, he suddenly understood the passion of some men for the unmarked, inscrutable; to see such a mask was to want it contorted, sweat-sheened and mobile. But these were the thoughts of the libertine, and there was no room here for him. (Never a time for him, never a place ...) He sighed.

"*I sigh for love, I die for love ...*" she sang softly, a coquettish rendition of one of the more shallow ballads of the moment. But he cut it right off when he said, unsmiling, "I sigh for satisfaction, my dear; I have found you out."

"Whatever do you mean?"

"I shall never tell you." He looked her in the face and then paced off, so that he might smile unseen at the sudden distraction in her eyes. (*Suggest to your enemy that his secret is yours, and whether it is yours or is not, whether or not he has a secret, he will fear you for it.* Thank you, Sr. Gracian!) He turned back and said in businesslike tones, "Miss Axelrood, I have come to report to you on the matter we discussed."

"To report progress, Captain Courtenay?"

"Completion, Miss Axelrood."

"I think we had better be seated, and discuss this thing."

"I should like Miss Chudleigh to be present at any such discussion."

"Why," she smiled, "we needn't trouble her."

"We shouldn't burden you—you alone—with it."

"You do not fully understand my relationship to Miss Chudleigh," she said with a certain amount of warmth.

"On the contrary, Miss Axelrood, I understand it all too well. If you will permit me an analogy, I could, in fairness, compare you ladies to a government rather like that of our ally the great Frederick of Prussia. There is a head of state whose function is to set policy. Then there is a body to carry it out. I would liken you, Miss Axelrood, to the latter."

Two bright spots appeared on her cheeks, though her half-smile was still as soft, her eyes as clear. "A body, Captain, to—"

"And what I have to propose," he said quickly and loudly, "will, I am quite, quite certain call for a policy

decision. Do you follow me?"

"Surely that would be for me to judge, if anyone, Captain!" she said sharply; then, between breaths, she was standing close to him with her hands on his elbows. "Lance," she said very softly, "Lance, we're going to quarrel."

He moved back. "We need not, Miss Axelrood." He smiled tightly. "You gratify me, by using my given name. Do you feel you know me well enough?"

"At the moment," she said candidly, "I feel I do not know you at all."

"I can't quite say why," he said off-handedly, "but I suddenly recall a piece of news. My old acquaintance Lancaster Higger-Piggott, the lawyer's lad, is no more."

"Ah," she said.

"And at almost the same time, Mr. Barrowbridge also passed away."

"Barrowbridge—dead?"

Sepulchrally, yet smiling, he said, "He will practice no longer in Bermondsey ... but of course, these are my personal concerns, and I should not trouble you with them. But perhaps their passing has made a change in me."

"You mourn them?" she enquired, a quiet sparkle in her eyes.

"I cannot. I am so deeply convinced they are going on to better things."

Her laughter finally escaped her; it had apparently been a-building for some moments. And he laughed with her, their eyes meeting. This was a dangerous playmate for sure, but it was a pleasure to joust with her on any field.

"Tell me," she said, "about that conviction."

"Ah, these are the matters I felt should be discussed with Miss Chudleigh."

"Miss Chudleigh has gone to visit a friend."

"May we expect her back presently?"

"I think not."

He pondered that, and then shrugged. "A pity. It only means that this interchange must be accomplished twice, and will therefore take longer. Not that it matters to me; the urgency, as I understand it, is Miss Chudleigh's."

She inclined her head. "The matter is urgent. Will you

tell me what you mean? Have you really found a course of action for her, in the matter of Mr. Hervey?"

"I have. There is only one thing I must be sure of; perhaps I should not ask, and perhaps you cannot tell me."

"Please ask anything."

"Thank you. Mr. Hervey, the Earl of Bristol's brother: would he oppose or favor an action which would eliminate this—ah—reputed marriage to Miss Chudleigh?"

"Favor it, with all his heart, more so with every passing minute," she said positively. "He will not, however, accept such a remedy as an action for divorce; nor would his brother the Earl."

"Very good then; with his agreement, we can make a positive solution—absolute."

"You are most elusive," she remarked, "in the matter of describing this solution."

"I quite agree," he said, and smiled. "You shall have it in time. At the moment, however, I would far rather discuss certain other things. You mentioned, I seem to recall, something about a little town-house in Holborn, and a number of activities this would make possible."

She moved to an ottoman and sank down upon it, indicating by a graceful nod that she wished him to take the chair by it. He sat down, watching her carefully; and just as carefully, she said, "I should very much dislike it, Captain, if this conversation should reach an impasse. The matter you have brought up is rather completely dependent upon the solution you say you have found. You give me to understand you will not divulge it. In all fairness, isn't it ... previous to discuss matters which can only follow that solution?"

*Just exactly the tack Barrowbridge said they'd take*, he thought with satisfaction. He smiled. "I had no intention of discussing the house in Holborn, Miss Axelrood. Actually, no one has offered me such a thing, and should anyone do so, I would unquestionably decline it."

"Decline it?" For a moment her containment fell away, and her mouth opened prettily. "Then what *do* you want?"

He placed an expression of horror upon his face and threw up his hands. "Why, Miss Axelrood!" But at the same time he winked. She made an amused *moué* at having been

so badly caught blurting out a straight question in this curled conversation; and again they had that moment of locked glances, of complete understanding and mutual, admiring disapproval.

He said, "You have quite captivated me, you and Miss Chudleigh. You have suggested that I might help you, and that I am prepared and empowered to do, but I should feel a cad indeed if I limited my assistance to the triviality we have discussed. I can be of *much* more help to you. As a matter of fact, unless I give you the ell, I think you'll find the inch quite useless."

Miss Axelrood put her cheek in her palm and looked up through her lashes. "You do go on," she murmured, "but—do go on."

"Thank you. Now, stated simply, the situation is this: Miss Chudleigh wishes a clear-cut annulment of her ... of these rumors. She wishes this because she and the Duke of Kingston would like the freedom to wed. Surely no one would oppose such a splendid union."

"Surely not."

His eyes widened and he stabbed a forefinger down at her. "You're *wrong!*"

She was puzzled. "I don't follow you, Lance. The Duke is the last of his line; he has no legitimate issue and the title will die with him unless of course—but I hardly think there would be any issue of this marriage."

"Quite probably not, but that's beside the point. Yes, the title's finished, but what about his estates?"

"What about his estates?"

"Come now, Miss Axelrood! With all the thinking you have done about this situation, you surely have not overlooked that!" When she kept looking at him blankly, he said, speaking slowly as to a child, "If, God forbid, the Duke should die tomorrow, who'd inherit?"

"Why, I ... I'm not sure. Someone in the collateral lines, I imagine, but—"

"But suppose yourself in the shoes of that 'someone in a collateral line.' D'ye think the Duke's death would find that 'someone' unaware of his rights? Don't you think he is at this very moment aware of what's coming to him when that time arrives?"

"I suppose so. But you keep talking about what happens when the Duke passes on, and the matter in hand is not that, but his marriage. *Oh!*" she squeaked, and put a hand to her mouth.

"And so it comes to you." He nodded approvingly, deeply enjoying his moment of patronization. "There is indeed someone who would, at the very hint of a rumor that Elizabeth Chudleigh was free to take his place as next heir, cause much embarrassment. So much, that even though her current situation was cleared up, the marriage might be made impossible. ... Poor Miss Chudleigh, to have come so far, to be so near her greatest desire!"

"Oh dear. ... I suppose, Captain Machiavelli, that you will prudently conceal the name of this potential heir and stoat-in-the-chicken-run."

"By no means. His name is Meadows."

"Oh good heavens!—the nephew. Hideous little stick-in-the-mud, all godly and duty-bound. I met him once. Charles."

"It is not. Charles is abroad just now. It is Evelyn, the other nephew, named after his uncle the Duke, and, I assure you, as fully aware of Miss Chudleigh's movements, intentions and desires as you are. He is a mournful young man of some thirty summers who has done little for the past ten years but write bad poetry and hunger for the Kingston lands and holdings."

"Oh dear," said Miss Axelrood again, "*that* one! He—but surely you know about *him*."

"Actually," said Lance, "I don't. And it doesn't matter—I should say, it is far better that way. Because I am about to meet that young man. To know him. To become fast friends and whisk him away with me to my country place, and to keep him interested there until Miss Chudleigh is free to marry—and marries."

She turned upon him quite the strangest gaze he had yet seen in her. "To keep him interested ... how?"

"The resources of human invention are unlimited. My dear departed mentor Mr. Barrowbridge used to say, there's always a way, and always an explanation. All one has to do is think of it. ...Whatever Meadows enjoys I shall enjoy. Whatever he is seeking I shall seek. Whatever his need,

there shall be more of it with me at my country place than anywhere else he knows. ... Why do you laugh?" he demanded, for she had virtually exploded.

"I'm sorry," she said when she could. She slipped a scrap of lace handkerchief from her bodice and dabbed at her eyes. Inadequately she explained, "It's your approach, dear Lance, your attack, and your confidence. They quite take my breath away. Do proceed."

"That is quite all. What are you thinking?"

"I am thinking of what Miss Chudleigh's feeling will be about this extraordinary plan of campaign."

"And what, in your draughts, is Miss Chudleigh saying?"

"She is saying that the whole thing is most ingenious, but that it would be more direct for her to make arrangements about Mr. Meadows without your intervention, once the other matter was in hand. We could not, in all conscience, trouble you quite so much."

"But I would insist. My conscience is equally involved. One must not begin a thing and not finish it; one must not finish a thing any way but properly. I *am* involved, Miss Axelrood, and, as you pointed out, am also quite confident. So much so that I could not countenance having this affair handled in any other way than that I propose. I would rather have it not handled at all. I would, actually, *insist* that neither Miss Chudleigh's freedom nor her marriage to the Duke of Kingston occur. Let me put it this way: if Mr. Meadows is present in London at the time of these actions, they cannot succeed. If *I* am in London at that time, they cannot succeed. How simple, then, how efficient it would be, if while I was keeping Mr. Meadows out of London, Mr. Meadows was keeping me out of London!"

"I have never heard of such outright audacity!" she breathed.

"Surely you have. And now, Miss Axelrood, you have the sum of my suggestions."

"Suggestions? What, Captain, is your word for a demand?"

"A suggestion," he said smilingly.

She put her hands on her knees with an abrupt soft slap and looked him in the eye, wagging her head in amazement.



"Then it is now my task to tell Miss Chudleigh that you have found an answer to the matter of her dealings with Mr. Hervey; that you can thereby free her to marry the Duke; that Mr. Meadows has it in his power to obstruct these matters; that you volunteer to remove Mr. Meadows from the scene and present him later with a *fait accompli*; and that you are doing this because of your interest in justice and the right, even to the extent of refusing the house in Holborn."

"I could not have summed it up better myself."

"There seems to be something lacking in the picture."

"I think not," he said.

She sat quiet for a moment, then, "Oh," she said. "The country place. Captain Courtenay, tell me about your country place."

"Why," he said off-handedly, "it's a sort of shootin'-box, you know, nothing elaborate. Large enough for a party of ... oh, say six, with a hovel for the servants and a bit of a stable and carriage house; but small enough to be almost lost in a map of England. And as I say, not elaborate. Comfortable, that's the word, as might suit any young gentleman of reasonable means, excellent background, and favorable prospects."

"Are you suggesting that the Duke might even now have such a holding, and would permit—"

"My dear Miss Axelrood, have I not yet made myself clear? I am not interested in placing myself in anyone's town house or country place, to live on expectations of my benefactor's continued generosity. Nor would I, in the circumstances, endanger this enterprise of ours by leaving myself—us—all of us open to such an accusation: 'Courtenay? Ah yes, the chap who held young Meadows prisoner while his uncle married Miss Chudleigh. Held him, mind you, at one of the Duke's own properties.' ... Ah no, Miss Axelrood; the less connection between the parties of this action, and me, the better. If all goes well—and it shall—even Meadows will never be aware that we know one another."

She rose, and paced, watching him as she turned and turned again. Then she settled again on the ottoman. "Up to now," she confessed, "I have been willing to hear you out as

one listens to a child's story of a dream—only to see how fantastic it can be. But at last I am beginning to feel the substance of your plan. This does not delude me, however, from the fact that you are asking a great deal in return for ... well, for your ingenuity, on the grounds that it is ingenious. You ask me to take your word for it that the action you have in mind for freeing Miss Chudleigh will be effective, and also to believe that you can and shall do this and that ... to the end that you shall have your own country place, purchased, no doubt, with hard gold sovereigns in your name."

"I would not insist on anything so magnificent!" he assured her. "A letter of credit from a commercial bank here would be ample." He laughed into her amazement until she had to join him. "As to your accepting my word for all this, of course I expect nothing of the kind. Has Miss Chudleigh a solicitor whom she can trust, who has a wide knowledge of law, and who could be here a week from today to conclude this matter?"

"Yes; I rather think Mr. Beasley would serve." She chuckled. "I think you will astonish Mr. Beasley. What would he be expected to do?"

"First, to inspect my plan for the court action. If—and only if—he agrees that it will succeed, and that the only possible objection to it could be raised by Mr. Meadows, then we may discuss the matter of the shootin' box, the details of which I shall have with me. It would be best if Mr. Beasley could draw up the letter of credit then and there. After that—why, Mr. Beasley may proceed with the case at his earliest convenience, and my good friend Mr. Evelyn Meadows and I shall meanwhile repair to my little place in the Surrey Downs. I think it's the Surrey Downs," he added blandly. "Is there anything more to discuss?"

"If there is," she said ruefully, "my poor woolly head will burst its seams."

"It has been a pleasure to discuss things with your poor woolly head," he said in his rumbling whisper. "I do believe you think as well as a man."

"All women think as well as men. If you had said I think *like* a man, however, I should have denied it. ... Where may I reach you, in order to give you Miss

Chudleigh's decision?"

"I may not be reached. Tomorrow morning I am off to look at some holdings, and also to see what can be done immediately in the matter of Mr. Meadows, his joys and preoccupations. I cannot say at this moment where I shall be, except that I shall return here in a week, at the same hour, ready to talk to your solicitor."

"And supposing your lofty confidence is misplaced, Captain, and Miss Chudleigh refuses to pursue your plan?"

"I do not even consider it," he said immediately. "I shall be back here in a week, and should the affair not be concluded at that meeting, I shall not return. The misfortune would be Miss Chudleigh's, not mine. What is your name?"

"Lilith," she said immediately.

"Thank you ... aha! Adam's first love, as I remember."

"And, some say, the devil's sister."

"You would not tell me before."

"No," she said, "but I am coming to like you."

"Then I shall take advantage of that fact, and salute it properly." And he quickly slid his arms about her.

She put her hands on his shoulders and averted her face, laughing. "No, please—no!"

"But why not?"

"I have told you; I am coming to like you."

He held her lightly and thought this out, in view of what had passed between them ... was it only last night? She no longer had her face turned away, but faced him, reading his eyes alertly and with great attention.

"But only last—" and he could not finish, for she put her hand on his lips. "I told you you would ask me that again," she whispered. "And I said, too, that the answer was: Because I wanted to talk to you."

"Ah yes. And after understanding that, I was supposed to be angry."

"With yourself."

"I remember." He put her by and stood up. "I am to understand that it is not possible for you to talk to me without—"

"It is not possible for a woman to talk to a man (unless it is herself she wishes to talk about) without first bringing

about a condition one might call 'afterwards' ... otherwise the very air is befogged with pressures and conjectures and *doubles entendres*, in which the point of any separate discussion may well be lost. So ... I wanted to talk to you."

"And yet, tonight, you—"

"Tonight," said Lilith, "It was you who wanted to talk, and not about me."

"You are very frank."

"You are very angry."

He turned to her hotly, and was met with an expression of such cool amusement, mixed with such genuine liking and admiration, that he was stopped short. "I suppose I am," he floundered. "It's just that I'm unused to ... that is, I naturally felt that ... what I mean to say is that it isn't you I'm angry at, but ... damme, girl, you're right," and he began to laugh.

"That's better." She gave him her long cool hand. "I shall miss you, Lance. And though I am, in a way, ranged against you, still, I wish you luck. I hope that this whole complicated matter turns out to Miss Chudleigh's advantage; there are a number of people who have attempted to best her and who bitterly regret it."

"My dearest hopes are synonymous with her success," he intoned.

"Get along with you," she smiled. He kissed her hand and left the library.

"Pendleton."

"Yes, Captain."

"My cloak. ... is my carriage outside?"

"No, sir. Your coachman asked me to hand you this."

It was the hardy threadbare cloak, the Bermondsey cloak, made up into a tight neat package. Inside one might feel the flat carved plaques of the Courtenay escutcheons.

Behind him, Lilith Axelrood made a slight sound—Lance thought, an amused sound. He turned. She stood at the foot of the great staircase, ready to mount, one long hand on the newel post. "So the coachman has passed on too, Captain?"

He had nothing to say. He felt his ears redly burning.

"Pendleton," said the girl, "ask Haines to come round with the trap and take the Captain where he wants to go. I

think he will remember the way. Good night, Captain.”

The butler went away, and Lance Courtenay stood in the door, watching the pink flame of her dress rising up the cold white sweep of the stair.

## 7.

HE FOUND HIM IN an alehouse, in a corner away from the light, hunched over the boards, both hands on a great brown stone mug. His eyes and his shoulders were set too close together, his jaw was too long and oddly edged straight up the front of his nether lip, as if, like a ram-bowed warship, a keel had been shaped upward to form a prow. He wore his hair tied back in a tight club, but it grew double-crowned and defied such discipline. His clothes were good, but he sat, he moved, he held himself in ways which held neatness in perpetual abeyance.

"Mr. Meadows? Mr. Evelyn Meadows?"

Meadows slowly withdrew his gaze from the bubbles in his mug and looked up and sidewise without moving his head. His whole aspect was one of uncertainty and suspicion; any true student of Balthazar Gracian could see them clearly, like two great handles thrust out and forward. Lance grasped them eagerly. "I know you," he murmured. He slid onto the bench opposite, fixed Meadows with a bright gaze, and waited.

"I don't know you," said Meadows in a high breathy voice.

"Ah. But I know you," reiterated Lance. He waited again.

Meadows dropped his eyes from Lance's to his brown ale. He raised the mug to his lips, seemed to study some puzzling conformation of bubbles within, and then put it down again without drinking. He flicked his eyes up and away as if to see if he was still being impaled; he was. "Well then." When Lance still would not speak, he wet his lips and said, "Well then, I mean, how? Y'know, dash it all," he added for reasons of his own, and urgently, as if he must.

Slowly Lance brought up his gloved hand; slowly he removed the glove. It was a theatrical gesture which would have justified the introduction of a solid gold hand, or a mangled hand, or no hand at all, and Meadows watched it, fascinated. Lance swung his index finger in a short swift

semicircle and aimed it between Meadows' eyes, which converged slightly to contain it. "You," said Lance, "are the author of *A Defence of Albertus Magnus*."

"Why, I say, yes," said Meadows, and tittered. "I say. Y'know, dash it all. However did you know?"

Lance knew, the way he knew where and how Meadows lived, what books he bought, where he had been to school and how he had fared there, how well he paid his bills and roughly their extent. Tradesmen, booksellers, landlords—anyone who would gossip, and virtually anyone does. As to the *Albertus Magnus* piece, Lance had heard of that from an amused old scoundrel who read proof for *The Monthly Review* and who was sometimes called in to filter the leas from the huge masses of submissions that lively journal received unsolicited. "Dammit, nobody's *attacked* Albertus Magnus, not since 1280 anyhow. This idiot Meadows read somewhere that Albertus had been called the Ape of Aristotle and got frightfully ruffled about it. God, Lanky, I wish the government would supply people like that with a bright purple stamp to affix to their work, so one would know in advance it should be sent back unread. Come to think of it they ought to have the stamp on their foreheads as well. Ever *talk* to the fool?"

"A splendid work," said Lance sincerely. "Far too good for the times. Too early or too late. Too early, probably. One has hope."

"I say. I mean, hang it. What did you say your name is?"

Lance told him, ordered a pint of bitter, and had the girl freshen Meadows' stone mug. Lance, who had had old Barrowbridge in an orgy of research for the past three days, simply tossed out names the way one would throw cubes of beef to a terrier, this way, that way: Roger Bacon, Paracelsus, Arnoldus Villanovanus, Vincent of Beauvais; and Meadows scurried about and snapped them up and begged for more. Phlogiston, *prima materia*, *aquae fortis et regis*, and the Philosopher's Stone. For Meadows, heaven help him, wanted to be an alchemist.

"Hang it, I mean. Chaps just don't think about important things. I mean, y'know, dash it, they don't," Meadows said after an hour.

"There's no one to teach one, if one's interested. ... Would you teach me?" asked Lance.

From the depths of his goathood, Meadows looked up at this dawn-drenched cockerel in stupefaction. "I ... I *couldn't!* I call myself only a dashed student, y'know, neophyte, what? Teach? Teach *you?*"

"I am but recently come into the light," said Lance sonorously. He hitched his coat back a bit from his bewildering brocaded waistcoat. "The hunt for pleasure, the waste," he said sadly, letting his voice trail away; then, "But you, you must have had a vision, like seeing the Grail; and here you are, searching, searching ..." And so the bait, the strike, the hook. "Have you somewhere where we can work, study, experiment?" begged Lance, all awe and excitement. He knew perfectly well the answer to that:

"Oh, I say, no. No, not now. I had a jolly little lodging in Hampstead, don't y'know, and I had a bit of an accident. You know Basil Valentine's three constituents, yes? Yes. Sulphur, mercury and salt as the basis of all metals. I think him wrong, y'know, but I wanted to repeat his experiments, what? Starting batching mixtures, basis twelve, y'know: one part salt, twelve parts quicksilver, twelve sulphur. Next batch, *two* parts salt, twelve and twelve, d'ye see?"

"Most systematic. Beautiful. What happened?"

"Smoke," said Meadows sadly. "Not the batch. That was melting nicely, though the sulphur smelt a bit, y'know, I mean, smelt. No, the deuced fire. Mixed saltpetre and tallow-fat, make it hotter, you know. Well, it smoked a bit, as I say. Landlord ... well, old Stokes is a greedy beggar, you can always put his jolly old lid on with a florin or so, but the others ... I mean, eight houses roundabout, you know, all the silly asses running out into the snow at midnight calling fire, everyone frightfully upset. And really, nothing was burning. Just smoke, you know, and I did get a bit muddled and wasn't using salt in the batch, it was sal ammoniac. It really wasn't so bad; one could get quite near it by noon the next day. I'd a sort of delegation call on me, y'know. Angry."

"Didn't you tell them it was in the interest of knowledge?"

"Well, naturally, my dear chap, but it seemed to make



them all angrier. I'd rather not talk about it," said Meadows. He shuddered and drank some ale and shuddered again. "Long and short of it, I can't study there any longer. I've asked here and there about other lodgings, but I do believe the householders must have a guild, what? sort of thing." He laughed ruefully. "Used to think it would be fine to be known, recognized wherever I went, what? Well I wish I weren't."

Lance suddenly clutched Meadows' biceps, half-frightening him out of his crouch. "I say! I've been casting about for a little place, house in Holborn, one or two possibilities across the river, perhaps a digs away from London. Couldn't make up my mind. This makes it up for me, though, by heaven! Suppose I took a place miles away from anywhere, no landlords, no neighbors—would you help me with a library and a laboratory, I mean, to arrange it all; I'll supply it; and get me started? Could you, d'ye suppose?"

Meadows glowed like a coal. "Well, I ... I mean, I oughtn't ... I did promise Charles, you know ..."

"Charles? What Charles?"

"Oh, my stuffy cousin. He's all mercantile and family duty sort of thing. Gone to Madrid, something about cork-bark and olive oil. Made me promise to stay and keep an eye on the family scandals. Oh, dash it all, nothing's happened about that in donkey's years and I don't see why anything should. Yes, I'll come, and willing. What can happen in four weeks, six?"

"What indeed?" murmured Lance, shook hands warmly and made arrangements to meet again on the morrow.

"Good evening, Captain."

"Evening, Pendleton. Are they in the library?"

"Yes, sir. Mr. Beasley and Miss Axelrood."

"Miss Chudleigh?"

"Miss Chudleigh has not returned, sir."

Lance raised his eyebrows, shrugged, and went into the library.

"Here he is now. Good evening, Captain Courtenay." Lilith Axelrood was in green tonight—very like the bottle-green which old Barrowbridge had once vividly described to

him. It suited her blindly, and he said so.

"And this is Mr. Beasley. Captain Courtenay."

"I am most honoured, sir."

Beasley, who had two deep vertical lines above his nose and two more, one on each side of his mouth, looked like a schoolmaster on the very verge of a caning session. He towered nearly to the height of Lance's collarbone; but he so carried himself that to that height he did tower. His expression at the moment denoted clearly that even if the Captain expressed himself as honoured, he, Beasley, was not. "Huddydew," he said rapidly, not offering his hand.

"Will Miss Chudleigh be joining us?"

"I fear not," said the girl.

"I think she's trying to avoid me," said Lance jocosely.

"I think she is," said Lilith Axelrood soberly. Lance shot her a quick glance; she made a slight shrug which indicated that it was nothing which could be pursued in the presence of Beasley.

Lance said, "I trust her disappointing absence will not keep us from making our little arrangement."

"I hold her power of attorney in the matter," said Beasley in a chilly voice.

"Then, to horse!" cried Lance, and from his breast pocket drew a sheaf of papers. He spread them on the table. "Here are a copy of the deed of the place I have in mind; a description of boundaries, properties, structures and accesses, along with all the freeholds, fiefs, torts and whereases that anyone needs to take title. Nice little place, really, modest and modestly priced. Belongs to an odd little baronet who lives nearby—Eustace, Gregory Eustace. Good little chap."

Beasley regarded the papers coldly, as if they were made of matter which a decent man would not mention, let alone touch. "I think," he said in his flat dry little voice, "that the first order of business, ought to be the suit-in-law you have allegedly discovered."

"By no means!" said Lance cheerfully. "I should very much dislike going into that, even to the point of convincing you and making it possible for you to proceed, only to discover that you might have some objection to covering this—" He slapped the papers—"for me. Surely it

is not unreasonable of me to wish to make sure of my *quid* for your *quid*."

"Very well, very well, let me see," snapped the lawyer. "Hm. Hmp. Featherfront, Titsey-in-Down. Strawdnry name."

"Where do you come from?" demanded Lance, knowing (from Barrowbridge) the answer.

Beasley peered over the papers at him. "Much Hadham, Herts," he barked. "Why, sir?"

"Just wondered, Mr. Beasley," grinned Lance. Over the lawyer's shoulder he saw Miss Axelrood bite her lip and turn away, covering her mouth with a handkerchief. Beasley returned to the papers, moving his lips as he read. "Hmp. Hmp. Barbarous country, Surrey Downs, Kent, all that. Hmp. Twelve ... *hundred* ... POUNDS!"

Lance regarded his fingernails. "Actually, two thousand, sir. One doesn't simply move in with nothing for maintenance."

Beasley exchanged a startled glance with Miss Axelrood. "You expect an outright gift of eight hundred over and above the exorbitant cost of this ... this pleasure palace?"

"It isn't exorbitant," said Lance flatly, "all those acres, the brook, the wood, and the buildings. And I wouldn't think of asking for eight hundred like that, sir; you do me an injustice."

"What, then?"

"Four hundred now; I wouldn't expect the other four hundred until the case was concluded to your satisfaction."

Beasley banged down the papers. "You, sir, are the most—"

"Mr. Beasley!" Miss Axelrood cautioned. Lance gathered up the papers. "I really didn't have to bring these at all," he said in wounded tones. "I thought you might like a documentation of the reasonableness of my requests. I don't feel you *want* to conclude this matter, Mr. Beasley."

"Of course he does," said Miss Axelrood quickly. "Please, gentlemen—surely we can discuss this without asperities."

"I'm willing," said Lance sulkily.

"Mr. Beasley?"

"I wish to see your outline of that suit," said Beasley,

with matching sullenness. "I will say that at the outset I doubted you had discovered such a thing in English law. My doubts have not diminished. I shall now go so far as to say that I will without objection accede to your monstrous proposal if you can prove that there is such a procedure and convince me that it will succeed. I say this because of a new and, I suspect, unshakable conviction that you are about to be unmasked as a—"

"Mr. Beasley!"

The lawyer, now all pink about his frozen gills, subsided and glared at Lance.

"You agree, Miss Axelrood?" Lance said. "Not the scurrilities; I understand and sympathize with the plight of a usual barrister faced with unusual matters; but the part about his agreement to my proposal, if the matter of the suit satisfies him?"

"I agree of course," she said placatingly.

Lance glanced at the clock on the mantel, smiled, and stepped swiftly to the bookcase which held the law library. "It's here, sir," he said, still smiling, and handed the barrister a book.

"What? What? *Procedures in Jurisprudence, Courts Christian*. What the dev—I beg your pardon, ma'am—what's this? The ecclesiastical courts do not cover a case of this kind."

"Don't they?"

"You see?" said Beasley, turning to Miss Axelrood. "This young ... uh ... man's bewildering performance is beginning to show a seam, as I knew it would. The ecclesiastical courts nowadays confine themselves almost exclusively to matters of Church holdings and physical properties, hierarchical successions, tithes and the like." He tossed the book to the table.

"Almost," said Lance equably. He glanced at the clock again.

"By the way, are you prepared to make out the letter of credit here and now, sir?"

"Of course, of course," said Beasley testily, "but I shan't be doing it."

Lance opened the book, selected a page, and handed it back. "Here you are, sir."

"What's this? What's—good heavens." He read rapidly. "Good heavens," he said again, in quite a different tone, and looked up at Lance as if his opponent of a moment ago had quite disappeared and had been replaced by a Lord Chief Justice. "Whoever would have thought of looking here for something which properly belongs to the common law, or at least to peerage action in the House of Lords?"

"What is it?" asked Miss Axelrood.

"Why—why ..." Beasley referred to the book again. "*Jactitation of Marriage*. It hasn't been called twice in four hundred years. Good *Heavens!*"

Lance stood by the table, admiring his fingernails again. The girl tugged the rapt lawyer's elbow. "Please tell me what it is, what it does, Mr. Beasley. After all, I'm not an expert, like you and the Captain."

"I'm sorry, m'dear; I'm a bit overwhelmed. This," he said, waving the book, "is a perfectly acceptable suit at law, hearable in the ecclesiastical court—a very quiet thing, mind you, merely a consistory of three—in which the plaintiff, in this case Miss Chudleigh, asks the court to issue an order against the defendant—Mr. Hervey—to cause him to cease and desist forever from claiming a marriage to the plaintiff. It is designed apparently to keep various ruffians from claiming marriage to people of higher station, thereby gaining public recognition and credit which is undeserved. You are right, sir: I see no reason why this is not applicable and adequate."

"Thank you, Mr. Beasley," said Lance modestly.

"I'm afraid I'm stupid," said the girl, "but—"

"Understandable, quite," said Beasley expansively. He was acting like a man who, asked to sip vinegar, tastes a rare old wine. "You see, when the court issues the order to Mr. Hervey commanding him to desist from boasting of this marriage, it is ordering him to desist from boasting of a *non-existent* marriage. By passing the order itself, it is at the same time accepting the nullity of the marriage. Its order is a *de facto* certificate, not that the marriage is hereby ended, but that it never existed. Am I correct sir?" he asked respectfully.

"Quite sir," responded Lance with a mimicry that passed right over the other's head and struck Miss Axelrood

dead center in the risibilities. "May I call your attention to —" He took the book and turned two pages—"this, Mr. Beasley?"

"Ah yes, yes. Oh dear." He turned to Miss Axelrood, who had recovered. "Is there anyone cognizant of any—ah—act of Miss Chudleigh's who might raise objections at the hearing? Say, one who might testify that in the past she has publicly acknowledged this—ah—alleged marriage?"

"Who might want to do a thing like that?" asked Lance blandly.

"Mr. Meadows," said Lilith Axelrood, "would be delighted to do a thing like that."

"Oh," said Beasley, "he might not even know if such a thing has ever occurred."

"Yes, Pendleton," said Miss Axelrood to the doorway.

"Beg pardon, Miss. A Mr. Meadows here for Captain Courtenay."

There was a stunned silence. Lance said quietly to his fingernails, "We could ask him." He looked pleasantly at the shocked barrister, the amazed girl, and said to the butler, "Tell him I'll be out directly, Pendleton."

"Yes sir."

"Why in heaven's name did you ask him *here*?" hissed Miss Axelrood.

"I anticipated some delay in concluding matters," said Lance, "and I thought this might hurry things up."

"Mr. Beasley, hurry; make out that paper he wants before that fool Meadows starts chatting with the servants."

"Oh dear yes." Beasley sat down at the table and took a cut quill. "That was twelve—uh—"

"Sixteen," said Lance, "and your promissory for the other four on conclusion of this business. Ah, don't fret so, Miss Axelrood. Meadows doesn't know Miss Chudleigh is in London, let alone here. I ascertained that."

"You do take chances."

"I have all along," he smiled.

"Your full name?" asked Beasley, scribbling away.

"Lance Captain Courtenay."

"Captain? Why, I thought ..."

"I try and try to explain that to people," said Lance tiredly, "but they all credit me with an army rank. I do wish

I could change that.”

“No doubt,” said Beasley, biting his thin lips. What is the difference in that face? thought Lance; it hasn’t changed, but now, by God, the old sly-bird approves of me. “Here you are.”

Lance took the letter and note and glanced through them. “Thank you very much, sir. And you, Miss.”

“And you, Captain. Lance.” She laughed, then sobered. “What will I do,” she asked, “if you or Mr. Meadows are seen in or near London until the conclusion of this affair?”

“Why, I’d imagine you’d ask exhumation of my poor dead friend Higger-Piggott,” he said.

“Just so,” she said lightly. “I clearly recall where he’s buried.”

“*Requiescat in pace*,” he said somberly.

“Go, go!” she cried.

“Not until I’ve invited you to my place in Surrey. Write me, will you? Have you the address?”

“F-featherfront, Titsey-in-Down,” she choked. “Go now!”

“Good night, Mr. Beasley.”

“Good night, young man. Perhaps we’ll meet again one day. Who knows, there might be a desk in my office for a bright young chap.”

“Thank you, sir, but I’ve other ambitions.”

“Will you go out to Mr. Meadows?”

“My most cordial regards to Miss Chudleigh.”

“Yes, thank you.”

“And to Lady Blanton.”

“Oh you—*idiot!*” and she fairly pushed him from the room.

Meadows stood near the door, a brown hat squashed between his hands, and blinked at the altitude of the Blanton entry. He seemed to shrink timidly as Lance strode across, laughing, then expanded again as he recognized him. “Jolly people here, what?”

“Jolly,” said Lance, and laughed again. “Thank you, Pendleton. Come along, Meadows old chap. We’ll have a tot of brandy in defense of Albertus Magnus. I think I’ve found the philosopher’s stone.”

“Oh, I say!”

They went out into the welcoming night.



## 8.

FEATHERFRONT WAS A WOOD, a brook, a house, a byre rebuilt into a carriage house, the foundations of a burned barn, a stable with servants' quarters in a second storey, and a state of mind.

The state of mind may have been a product of the spring that year, which was remarkable even for England, even for the North Downs. It may have been a magic, such as they say lies over houses built too close to running water and old woods where the Little Folk have not yet been driven away. Or the new population of the house may have been sufficient to account for it; it was mad, mysterious, hilarious, indecent, joyful, and studious.

In an ell very nearly as tall as the main part of the house, Evelyn Meadows established his laboratory. The peaked roof bore a particularly silly cupola, and this they had stilted up and had knocked out a smoke hole under it, affording an escape for the fumes and vapors without which alchemy seemed such a sham. There were bookracks and lecterns and inkhorns ranged on two sides of the room; on the third, racks and shelves of chemicals, ores, metal specimens, rhinoceros and narwhal horns, toad skins and the other raw materials of the Paraceltic art; the fourth wall was devoted to the tools of the trade: an alembic, rows of flasks, beakers, retorts and graduates, scales and, of all things, an astrolabe. This wall was divided by a monstrous fireplace, not quite high enough to walk in upright, but wide enough to spit an ox. Despite Lance's offer to put up the equipment and supplies, Meadows' collection had been almost completely sufficient for the purpose; indeed, his lodging had not sufficed for all of it; he had had a second flat in London from which his hobby had crowded him and which he had been using for some time exclusively as storage. In so haphazard a fashion had this clutter been accumulated that Meadows himself was astonished and delighted at its richness and variety; he had things there he not only had forgotten, but things he would say he had

wished for all his life. Owl-droppings he had, cantharides and sword-fish teeth; flakes of rust from one of the Holy Nails, a brace of otherwise empty flagons each containing the dying breath of a hanged man; picklings of a blue rat, a whale's eye, an Arctic mouse, a child's hand, an unborn stoat, and an unidentified object with abscesses.

The main part of the house formed a shell around what was almost a single room, a great hall with a fireplace at each end and a row of rooms along the north wall so designed that their ceilings formed a balcony for the hall. One end of this balcony was closed to form yet another room, with its separate staircase leading by a covered way to the kitchens at the rear. After swearing Meadows to fealty and silence, Lance confessed to him that there dwelt in that upstairs room a part of his past too shameful to describe and too painful to discuss; Meadows took the revelation as a weighty compliment and respected the confidence devoutly, his sole reference to it a worshipful expression when Lance would sigh and, grim-faced, mount the covered stairs and closet himself with the mystery. "Brave chap, that Courtenay," he would mutter over his fuming sulphurs.

The shameful, painful secret was, of course, Barrowbridge, at long last separated from his noisome Bermondsey and ensconced here like a spectre in a castle. He was served and cared for by a mute, an ox-shouldered young woman acquired with the property. She could hear well enough and understand tolerably; Barrowbridge was on splendid terms with her because she was obedient and because she listened to him.

The days fell into a shambling order. If Lance missed skimming like a bat at eventide into the margins of high society, he did not show it. Meadows was in seventh heaven. He produced elixirs and effluvia, precipitates, ash, conglomerates and stinks—and theories. He hummed and droned with theories: phlogiston and the soul of mercury, the Aristotelian quadrangle and its dissimilarities to the tetranomy of Vincent of Beauvais, and on, and on, and on. It was pleasant, after a time; in the long evenings when he did not feel like chatting with Barrowbridge, nor walking on the Downs, he could nod by the fire and listen to the excited

drone of Meadows' voice, repeating a name or a Latin phrase every twelve or so minutes—just enough to keep Meadows primed and pumping.

Meadows was happy. Meadows was more than happy. Lance had never seen a man more capable of creating a world for himself as he wanted it, and living in it wholly. Any evidence to the contrary could be forgotten as soon as seen. He was no longer a student; he was an alchemist. He did not pretend to be a master, but he felt he would be, as soon as he made his great discovery. Great discoveries care not who makes them; Meadows was in tune with this, being a great discoverer who cared not what discoveries he made. He mixed messes and heated them, made infusions and rubbed them on a cat. With long forceps he lifted smoking lumps from his fires and held them hopefully against silver, then against lead, and tested the lead with his heart beating wildly; always was he disappointed, never dashed.

With all this happiness, it was obvious—painfully so—that his greatest happiness lay in Lance; Lance's ear, Lance's presence, Lance's opinions. Lance required little, but short of leaving one of his experiments at the explosion point, Meadows did his utmost to anticipate anything Lance might want. Lance would return from a stroll on the Downs, to find the fire laid in the living room, his pipe filled and waiting, and more often than not some tome on transmutation or the noble airs awaited him beside it; this would surely be the subject of today's efforts. At the first sound of his step at the door, Meadows, bearing a flaming coal from one of his cauldrons, would come bounding like a meteor across the great hall to start Lance's fire, trailing sparks and smoke and observations: "Who cares about phlogiston? *I've* found a heavy air that won't burn; if phlogiston is life then this is death." Or, "It burns, it burns!" which would mean that Lance had to sprint into the laboratory to help him save the building from the flames, or run to the goods-chest for salve for his blisters, or rush to the pantry for milk for him to drink and quench the interior fire; for Meadows was scientist enough to insist upon trying out his elixirs in the most direct way.

Lance quickly became aware that he was not another happiness for Meadows; he was *the* happiness. Meadows

neither hugged him nor fell at his feet; he had no need to. When a man has a preoccupation as profound as Meadows and his alchemy, and yet will permit any interruption, any change of subject from someone, he obviously values the someone above the preoccupation. Meadows shared his alchemy not so much because of Lance's stated conviction that he too was interested, but because Lance was key to it, part of the pattern of his absorption.

Lance spoke of it to Barrowbridge. "Not that I mind terribly; I pictured myself wracking my brains for ways and means to keep the idiot content. I thought I might even have to drug him, or lock him in. I never dreamed I'd simply have to loose him like a ruddy falcon, and have him eating out of my hand."

"You might have known," Barrowbridge chuckled. Within a week he had settled in at Featherfront—Lance's second great surprise, for at the outset he had fumed and wept and cursed most bitterly. Getting him down by coach and up those stairs had been a mountainous undertaking, and for two days after he had glowered out the window and complained that a body couldn't get a wink of sleep without so much as a mussel-monger crying outside the window; the fresh air made him cough, the fresh food sat ill on his jaded stomach, and there wasn't anything to do. These, it appeared, were protests which he felt duty-bound to release, and once catharsized, he was done with them. His flesh seemed firmer, and part of his voice had returned. He slept a sinful amount—ten to twelve hours out of the twenty-four—and spent the rest of the time jollyng Johnson, the heavy-shouldered mute girl, and reading. His room was three times as large as the one in Bermondsey; he had all his books and more besides, Lance having been fully aware that some new ones would help him lick into the new place, as one puts butter on the paws of a cat in a new environment, that it may lie and contemplate while removing it. He had insisted upon paying his own way and a bit over, and with a minimum of grumbling, though as ever he hoarded the secret of his total resources, whatever they might be. And so he acclimated and thrived. He had his bed and his great chair, his stick and his thoughts and enough conversation to suit him; and as a bonus, a gimlet-hole in the wall which

faced the great hall, whereby he could keep track of events below; this delighted him more than a window might have done. He was thoroughly conversant with the worshipful capers of Evelyn Meadows, and, "You should have known," he told Lance.

"Known what? How?"

"Did you not spend the better part of three days haunting his haunts and gossiping with his gossips?"

"Ay, but it was his alchemical pursuits I was interested in, once I found out about them, and I found them first."

"You learned nothing else?"

"Only what I already knew."

Barrowbridge wagged his big old head. "Ah, lad, lad, I taught ye when reading for law and the use of a law, never to stop with the law which concerns you then, but to read all around it, before and behind it, everything like it and all that echoes to it. And I think, in law, you learned that. But you've forgotten to apply it elsewhere."

"What did I miss, then?"

"Why, that young specimen was sent down from Christ's Hospital."

"I didn't know he went to school there ... Why?"

"Eh. He got a passion for a house master, that's why, and couldn't conceal it. 'Course, what he was sent down for was not concealing it; but that's the way the world wags."

"Mr. Barrowbridge! I never dreamed he was one of those. I mean, I've seen dozens of them mincing about, of course, but—Meadows? He doesn't look the least—"

"Ye've seen pimps and panders, lechers, wife-beaters and catamites, time without number. If you haven't recognized some of 'em as such, it's because you're purblind and wishful. As a lawyer you should know better; as a gentleman, you should be aware of what to avoid publicly." Again he committed that harrowing laugh. "Don't look so stricken, Lanky! He's a nice enough lad, our Meadows. Balmy, of course, but only because his hobbies are unfashionable. The one would have made him valuable at the time of Roger Bacon, the other, popular at the time of Plato."

"What on earth am I going to *do*?" Lance demanded, in a voice approaching a bleat of panic.

“Na, na then,” soothed the barrister. “Don’t let it trouble you, not a bit. He’ll make no excursions on you and your little white body, I’ll wager. Can’t you see that what he’s doing is searching for his special Grail instead? He doesn’t want his great discovery just for himself. He wants to honor you with it. There’s an old saying I’d appreciate your committing to memory, Lanky. (’Tisn’t Gracian this time, it’s Chinese): and that is, ‘A cat that’s once stepped on a hot stove will never step on a cold one.’ Meadows never has lived down the public humiliation his openness and honesty got for him at Christ’s College; he’ll never make the same mistake again.”

“Damn it,” said Lance irritably, “all this while you haven’t understood a thing about how I feel. I’m not afraid of anything he might do, for heaven’s sake! I’m thinking about what they’ll be saying in town.”

“Eh?”

“You haven’t heard those young bloods chat after dinner; I have. They gossip worse than seamstresses. If one of the chaps is larking about with a woman, it’s—it’s like a ruddy game. One point for each level of society higher than you; an extra point if she’s pure or married; if she’s beneath you, you forfeit points accordingly. If you’re caught you lose all your accumulated reputation and forfeit about ten; you’d have to seduce a countess or better to make up for it.”

“Points? Good heavens, not really!”

“No, of course not; I’m just trying to explain to you what it’s like. Now a thing like this Meadows business ... why, it can cling to a man all his life! I’ve seen it happen. And the worst is, once a thing like that gets about, the poor victim never hears about it himself. I’ve seen chaps lose appointments, fail in betrothal arrangements, lose elections because of a buzz-buzz like that, and all behind a man’s back. Mr. Barrowbridge, I can’t afford anything like that!” He struck his forehead suddenly. “My God,—Lilith Axelrood’s laughing already—laughed right in my face about it!”

“Eh. Now you see before you a penalty of understanding, which breeds tolerance, which overlooks danger. You’re right, lad. You’re quite right. Has Meadows told anyone where he is? ... eh! No matter, he will, poor

tilted innocent, he will, never thinking he might harm his benefactor."

The benefactor got up and took a turn around the room. "I can't go back to town yet, nor send him. If I went somewhere else ... no, I don't think Mr. Beasley would care for that very much; it would be pointless unless I were seen, talked to people, and I don't want to disturb matters just now ... dash it all, sir, what can I *do*?"

Not for the first, nor the hundredth time, Barrowbridge said, "There's a way out, lad, a way out. All we have to do is think of it."

So they thought, and they thought. And suddenly Barrowbridge brought his hand down on his meaty thigh: "Got it!"

"What, sir, what?"

"You've got to get involved in a scandal."

"A scandal?"

"We must most judiciously choose this scandal," said Barrowbridge pensively. "Now lad: Identify, delineate."

"I don't see how a scan—"

"Don't you, though? Some escapade, designed to get back to London before any silly story about Meadows' being here? Some adventure vivid enough to be talked about, natural enough to underline your acceptable appetites, yet harmless enough to do you no discredit in future."

"But that second black won't make a white, sir."

"Ah, it will here. You'll find that one of the outstanding characteristics of vice is its specialization. Your sot who drinks himself into the ground does it generally with a single liquor, the winehead eschewing brandy and the brandy-bucko scorning wine. Let you be known as a party to some scandal involving a woman, and your gossips will have a choice of narratives about you—but a choice, Lanky; one, not both."

"But how can we know which they'll tell?" Lance virtually wailed.

Barrowbridge pulled his nether lip. "It is that element which calls for the judiciousness of our choice. We must present you as rake, not defiler; libertine rather than lecher."

"Libertine—I?"

"Men have made greater sacrifices for king, country and career," said the old man dryly.

"And how on earth am I to find just the proper scandal?"

"Manufacture it, lad. I do think that with the careful application of the *reductio* we might deduce an ideal, and then devise a path to it between the high walls of our limitations."

"You treat it like a—an exercise upon the chessboard!"

"Ay, and therein lies our greatest chance of success. When the sage of Tarragona said, *Every onset of passion is a digression from rational conduct*, he was speaking of anger; but taking passion at its word, we find ourselves with a prime coloration for our problem: let it be, throughout, a course of rational—that is, reasoned—conduct. It will be, to the public eye, an act of passion; in passion, as in wine, there is truth. In his cups and on his couch a man reveals himself more than in the confessional, which is by no means as conducive to revelation. Whatever you reveal in this act, then, will be publicly regarded as the truth about you; see to it that reason does not desert you during the performance. For the time being treat your animal aptitudes, not as allies, but as enemies, remembering that a wise man gets more use from his enemies than a fool from his friends."

Lance bowed his head and opened his very pores to the old man's counsel. Many times before he had seen Barrowbridge at work on a problem in just this fashion—discursive, preparatory, dripping aphorisms and homiletics, and, while circling his problem, even while passing and re-passing openings to it which, later, he might use, spiraling relentlessly nearer. The arrival at the heart of the problem, while delayed, was inevitable; the problem by then would be far more familiar than formidable.

"I knew an old sinner in Somerset who had a single genius; he carved little bears out of wood. I asked him how he did it," said Barrowbridge, "and he said 'Ah lewk an' lewk at woo-ood until Ah zee Bruin. Then Ah oon-coover awa' t'chips off'n.' This should be our approach. Let us uncover away all that is superfluous, and we shall be left with what we can use.



“Let us then eliminate all that might discredit you—the degrading, the disgusting, the perverse and the ludicrous. I amend that. An element of the ludicrous might be a desideratum, provided that it is not yourself who suffers from it. We want, after all, a story worth telling, and a touch of the ridiculous is like woodruff in sweet wine.

“Let us also eliminate that which might offend the majority, and any powerful minority. The partner in your venture must be unconnected with royalty, the Church or the higher nobility. She must not be excessively tender in her years because that’s felonious, nor excessively aged, for that would discredit you. She must not be beneath you, for the narrative would then be of no moment. Should she be your peer, there is nothing to be gained from that circumstance alone, and the other factors in the interchange must supply the unusual. It would seem, then, that she must be someone of good but not powerful family, of high but not exalted station, of an age in no way unsuited to such activities, and above all, in no position to prolong matters one moment longer than it takes to create the scandal.”

“Incredible,” murmured Lance devoutly.

“Don’t interrupt, boy,” said Barrowbridge, who was never happier than at such moments as this. “So much for the heroine. Now, the occasion. It should not be too forceful, lest you find yourself vying for honors with a mere blooded bull. It should not be too abrupt, lest in the telling you race with the rabbit. It must seem that she, not you, created the opportunity, and that you, not she, commanded its consummation. It is the function of a man to yield to his desires, and the duty of a gentleman to yield to his lady’s; the art of seduction, then, lies in turning these currents into the same channel and making them confluent and synonymous. From this we derive that on this occasion you must clearly perform both function and duty, this being the entire purpose of our enterprise, the very *coda* of the legend we are creating.

“Now we can see the goal and the limitations, and that the latter are, as I have said, walls flanking the course and not obstacles across it. Your route should be all the more direct for that; which brings up the last requisite and completes the picture:

“Speed.

“*Quod erat demonstrandum*, Lanky, and I’d suggest you proceed with dispatch and without procrastination.”

“What would I do without you?” Lance cried.

“Do without, I imagine. I’m glad you can do with, though; I’ll confess it. Who was it termed the human brain a ‘wrinkled jelly’? Skeffington? Richardson? No matter; but it’s a splendid description of what your friend Barrowbridge has become. Let me lie here shivering totally with all subtle movements, shielded by the carapace of your house and nourished by the sanguinary fluxions of our good mute Johnson up and down the artery of my covered stair; let me be here, I say, white matter and grey, supplying the total organization pulselessly with mysteries, conjectures, solutions and escapes. ... Let me know what happens, Lanky.”

“That I will, sir, and thank you.”

Beside Lance’s brook at Featherfront ran a bridle path. A mile or so downstream it met the little road between Titsey and Tatsfield; the other way, three miles or so, would bring a rider to Sir Gregory Eustace’s holding.

It might be called a manse, considering the land he owned, which, though fit only for goats and bark-browsing deer, was considerable in extent; indeed, it began at the margin of the Featherfront property, which had been a part of Sir Gregory’s land. Sir Gregory called his estate Minden, after the battle, which perpetuated itself in his memory because it was there he had by mistake achieved his baronetcy, having become hopelessly lost with a contingent of light horse, and emerging suddenly from a defile, had inadvertently pierced and broken the French lines and started that famous rout. He was a widower, a very owl of a little man, with sharp ears, huge eyes and a little hooked beak, and he lived with a sizable staff of servants, three daughters, their governess (a genteel spinster named Callow), a small hunting stable and some dogs. His library was admirable and his chief occupation was a prodigious combing of it and the making of endless notes, it being his ambition to write the biography of the City of the Seven Hills from the whelping of the Wolf of Romulus to the death

of the thirteenth Clement. Since the purchase of Featherfront, Lance had made it a point to ride or walk up to Minden from time to time; it was a pleasant walk with a glass of good sack at the end of it; it was a source of London news and talk, for Sir Gregory went up for a day or so each fortnight; and it was ... now—

Dutifully precepted by Barrowbridge, Lance left no possibility unexamined. What might have been an embarrassment of riches in his search for a partner in scandal became a most methodical matter after his talk with the old man. There was an upstairs maid, for example, a veritable queen among females, a creature of light, who could be summarily dismissed, because of the elimination of the lower orders. He was saved cogitation upon Barbara and Bella Eustace, their likes, dislikes, and potential weaknesses, because of the dictum about ages: they were eight and ten years old respectively. He did not know how old Elaine, the elder daughter, was, and he would not ask; she was past thirteen, which was what was important. The only other female of high enough station, who also fell within the 'natural activity' statute, was Hepzibah Callow, the governess. Miss Callow had a classical education, extraordinarily perfect diction, and skin trouble; her father, he heard, had been an Irish army officer, which seemed on the face of it to present little altitude until one recalled that the Gunning sisters and Miss Chudleigh herself came from similar sources. It would seem that the daughters of Irish officers floated free in the social structure, rather like literary men and educators; one might never solidly place them as not gentry, just as merchant baronets and musicians could never quite be called gentlefolk.

Miss Callow, then, and Elaine Eustace.

Elaine Eustace was totally subject to her father's control in speech and movement, but the silent net of his discipline could not contain her vibrancy, which escaped in little vivid flashes of teeth, of eyes, of wit and wistfulness. Her hair was gold (and red) in the sun, red (and gold) by the fire. She seldom looked up at anything which interested her, really interested her; it was as if she were afraid she could not contain herself if she opened her eyes; so she would peep between lowered lashes like some bright bird turning and

turning its head behind bars. On the other hand ... there was the warning about involvements during, and involvements after.

So then ... Miss Callow?

Oh dear, he thought. Miss Callow.

He bade his farewells at the conclusion of this most casual of calls, and walked home in deep thought. He wanted to go straight to Barrowbridge, and found his patience not broken but badly bent at having to negotiate a particularly ardent attack of Meadows. This time it was not as he entered, but before, while crossing the footbridge to his land. Meadows burst out of the house, half-mad with exhaustion and enthusiasm; he had for three days and nights been gobbling the dim contents of old books and slaving over his bubbling messes. "Paracelsus!" he piped from a hundred feet, capering and galloping across the bowling green. "My *dear* chap, I can't tell you. I can. I shall." Almost as an afterthought, he resumed breathing for a time, clutching both fists together tight under his heart, the while fixing Lance with eyes so deep-set and far away that they seemed part of some other-place, like animals peering from a distant wood. "Paracelsus, I've discovered Paracelsus. I've read him and read him; read of him, I mean to say and all that." He breathed again painfully and shrilly, and then took Lance's left biceps in both hands, kneading as he towed the young man along. "And I never knew what he *meant*."

"What did he mean?" asked Lance laboriously.

"Nonsense!" cried Meadows, so abruptly that Lance shied like a colt, and Meadows almost left the ground. "I mean, it's nonsense about the philosopher's stone, transmutation and all that. No, not that, I mean I believe it can be done, but what's nonsense is that transmutation is what alchemy is *for*. It jolly well isn't I mean to say," he blethered, and paused to wipe spittle from the corner of his lip with his shoulder, "Alchemy is what Paracelsus said, for making medicines. Alchemy," he orated, loosing one of his hands to help him, "is chemistry and chemistry is medicine. Alchemy is medicine, d'you see, what? What? My dear, dear chap," he said, replacing the elocutionary hand a split-second before Lance could free himself, and beginning to

knead again, "it's a revelation. Bring me the sick, bring me the maimed!"

"My dear, dear chap," said Lance, unable to keep himself from vicious mimicry, "don't you think you ought to get some sleep?"

"Sleep? Sleep? at a time like this? I'll never sleep again. Yes, thank you, thank you, that's what I shall do first. An elixir to banish sleep. You know what you've *done*?" he squeaked, incredibly adding another wave of excitement to his hysteria. "You've given me a score of years, just by a wave of your hand. For if we sleep a third of each day, we sleep a third of a life, and if a life's threescore years, we're dead and useless a third of it, sleeping. I owe you twenty years for your inspiration, Lance, and I shall pay it, I shall pay it ..." and at last he loosed his host and went toward the laboratory wing at a dead run.

Lance stood watching the thin, ungainly, flapping figure, crossing the green, crossing the *paille maille* court, catching his foot in a wicket, which pulled out but which also tilted the flying alchemist forward at forty-five degrees. He increased his pace and maintained a dynamic equilibrium at that angle for fully thirty yards, running faster and faster until his outstretched hands slammed into the side of the building, and his head immediately afterward, though not nearly so hard. Lance saw it rebound, and then Meadows pressed the building away from him like the good Lord setting aside Satan, turned and weaved through the door.

Lance rubbed a while at his compressed biceps, and suddenly shuddered briefly, but quite as violently as a wet dog. He entered the great hall and quietly crossed to the inside door to the lab and peered through. Evelyn Meadows was crumpled on a wooden bench, his right hand extended toward a stirring rod, and an expression of ineffable peace on his dirty face. He was fast asleep.

Lance sighed and went to the storage for a light blanket, which he brought back and spread over the slumberer. Softly, softly, like a nurse soothing the troubled slumber of a sick child, Lance whispered, "Wretched unnatural swine ... why didn't you *tell* me?"

He plodded up the covered stair to Barrowbridge.

“Mr. Barrowbridge,” he asked wearily, “would a governess do?”

## 9.

MISS CALLOW WAS FLATTERED.

Miss Callow had been flattered every day for a week now, what with the new obedience she got from the girls, the respectful astonishment granted her by Sir Gregory, and most of all the daily presence of the grave young godling from Featherfront. Of the latter flattery Lance was of course aware, since he had planned it. She familiarized him with the others, gushing out her impressions with all the irresistibility of the newly open-hearted.

"They peep through the curtains when you come, the little dears. Barby jumps up and down and says 'He's walking! He's walking!' or 'He's riding!' and Bella pushes her away from the window and she cries. Haha! The dears. Bella asked her father if when he was knighted he was given a suit of armor. She wanted him to lend you the suit of armor as a sort of game, so she could see you come riding up in the sunlight, the silly thing, imagine, armor in these times, and borrowed from a man *his* size!" She looked up at him and showed her teeth and the edges of her eyes, neither of which were quite white; her incisors looked like molars. "And since we've been walking every day, they watch me and watch me, wondering what I do, what I say, that makes you notice me; they obey so nicely and pay attention every *minute*. And then there's poor dear Sir Gregory; I dare say he never noticed me in his life before except as an item 'governess' in his accounts and at his table. Since our little walks began, I can never so much as pass him in the hall but he stops and turns and watches me by, as much as to say, how do you do it, Callow! There's a pipit"

Lance gravely inspected the flight of a small brown bird which flew like, and looked like, most other small brown birds his city-bred eyes had encountered. He made an interested sound, however. Even as alchemy had been Meadows' bait, "natural philosophy" had been hers. "Natural philosophy," in Hepzibah Callow's lexicon, was very nearly what would one day be called "biology." All

living things were within its compass. The “philosophy” part of it was an untiring effort to link all things into one great shapely analogy; as the flowers do, so do the bees, and as the bees, cattle, camels and cormorants; as these do, so should man. It was a shockingly long time before Lance saw the pitfall in this. Having little interest in the specifics to begin with, it was only surprising that he caught up with the generalities when he did.

“Dragonfly,” she would croon, holding the four-winged horror four inches from his mouth, while, since he would not, his chin retreated and retreated until he was only neck, with a white frightened gash of a mouth, from nostrils to collarbone. He was morally certain that the monster would escape and *zipzip!* sew up his lips. “You see this little, ah, probe? It’s a *daddy* dragonfly. They mate on the wing, swooooping and climbing,” she would beam. Or a swarm of bees big enough to pull down a grape-arbor: “The queen’s in there, calling and calling, and oh! they all want her.” He learned about vixen and she-bears, and the latter’s proclivity for licking their shapeless young into final form with their strong wet warm tongues (and heard the words used strongly, wetly, warmly, by a tongue that shot out and oozed back like a hermit-crab); he learned about *chad*, *meati*, the *fundus* and the *sphygnum*, and a great many other answers to questions he wouldn’t dream of phrasing.

It was all scholarly, impersonal; she made no direct analogies. She discussed all things unblushingly because she never touched upon a single thing upon which contemporary usage demanded a blush. The analogies were there, however, pervasively, atmospherically there. There were times when in spite of himself Lance was carried away by the ubiquity of her intimations, and saw flashes of her world, through which crawled, climbed, flew, scurried, struggled and strove organ paired with organ. His mien was calm and his discourse was polite, but underneath he felt a rising tide of horror as he learned and learned things and things. *My God*, he would cry inwardly, *date-palms too?*

He went to Barrowbridge about it. “I can’t catch her up,” he said ruefully; “The faster I run, the faster she goes, but she’s behind me. Surely this isn’t what you had in mind.”



“Seize the initiative, boy. Push a little sooner, a little harder than she bargains for.”

“Push a capful of wind over a precipice,” Lance grumbled. “You haven’t seen her.”

“No.”

So he brought her. It meant only a few minutes’ longer walk, time enough to apologize for the primitive state of the residence of a scholar and a scientist. Mindful of the old man’s counsel, he put an arm about her shoulders as he explained. As soon as he had finished his statement she made this speech: “I have never done this before. However, if you feel as I do that there are currents in nature which should not be denied, and if you will be ordinarily civil to me in my ignorance, I should be glad to learn the mortal version of the dragonflies’ coupled flight.” That is what she said, “coupled flight.” Lance took his arm off her shoulder and walked holding it slightly away from his side, not trusting its effect on people it touched.

Meadows broke out of the house as they came into view, turned right about and broke in again. Lance led Miss Callow to the laboratory door and they entered just in time to see Meadows’ left heel flip out of sight. Miss Callow marched to the center of the tall cluttered room and moved her two tense hands together and upward as if they were full of sand which she was letting trickle out between the quivering fingers. “Ah, science,” she intoned. “Science ...” and then turned to Lance, baring her front fangs in a worshipful smile. Over her shoulder Lance saw Meadows’ head appear in the doorway, its hollow eyes fixed on Miss Callow’s three-quarter rear profile.

“Come,” said Lance, and went toward the doorway. By the time they reached it, Meadows was disappearing out the front. He seated her on the settle before the fireplace and excused himself, and went round through the kitchen to the covered stair. At its foot he paused, his nostrils aquiver. The air was spoonable-thick with the combined odors of rotten celery and rancid butter. He looked about and saw the mute girl, Johnson, perched on a high stool by a window, which she had closed as far as possible on her arm, leaving a bandaged portion outside in the fresh air. He called a question to her, but she merely turned dumb brute eyes to

him and away. He shrugged and mounted.

He found Barrowbridge lying in bed next the wall with his eye fixed to his gimlet-hole. "I say," said the barrister, "these are barefaced times, enough so that the *Monthly Review* hints it sinful that our poor mad George III should be left unshaven. Yet look at yon paramour of yours, Lanky. Methinks if a body must wear a mustache it ought to be kept trimmed."

"Ay, she's a beauty," said Lance, and explained what had happened for a mere touch upon the shoulder.

"Jolly good thing you didn't touch her knee," said the old man in high amusement. "She'd bring you a litter of twelve."

With some heat Lance snapped, "I'd count myself fortunate could I lie abed and be a sage while you cast your innocence at yon hairy limbo."

"Advice," said Barrowbridge, leveling his eyebrows, "is worth generally what you pay for it. I was in error to give it to you gratis, Lanky; you have it devalued. There is also a saying, I think Portugee, to the end that one should never give advice, lest one be blamed for the consequences to fools who follow it."

"Mr. Barrowbridge," said Lance piteously, "what am I going to do?"

The old man applied his eye to the gimlet-hole again, and turned away shaking his head. Then he was still for a while. His eyes snapped open. "There's a—"

"—way out, if only you can think of it," finished Lance for him.

Unsmiling, but with his eyes a-twinkle, Barrowbridge said, "Thank you, lad. Now, do you escort the lady home, and we'll apply ourselves to the matter."

"Very well ... I know you will, sir, and thank you. ... What've you done to Johnson? She smells like an exhumation."

"Not I! 'Twas your associate there. She burned herself on a faggot in the stove and he's treating it. He has a theory, I think, that evil has a magnetism for evil, and he's applied yon serpent-spit to her to draw the poison."

"Heaven preserve her!" Lance bolted down the stairs and ran to the servant. He knocked open the casement and

drew her away from it; the odor from the dressing fairly knocked him down. He held a handkerchief to his mouth and with his free hand tore off the dressing. The forearm was flayed and shiny in a patch six inches long, and covered with a yellow-green tallowy substance which was obviously the author of the stench. He plunged the arm into a deep firkin of wash-water where at least it was sealed off from the air, took two great handfuls of soft soap, and working under water, scrubbed away the medicament, while the mute made screaming faces. When he drew the arm out it still smelled worse than a living thing should but at least one might stay within a township of it. He picked up the bandage from the floor with a stick and consigned it to the flames, and found a fair white cloth to bind the arm with.

"Now do you scrub yon greasy spot where the bandage lay, and get that firkin downstream of here. Don't bring it back, either. And after this conceal thy wounds from Mr. Meadows; come to me or to Mr. Barrowbridge. See you don't go near the laboratory until you get that bandage as dirty as the one I burned."

Tears came silently; the heavy creature pressed his hand shyly and turned away. Well hang it, he thought, where would we get another mute if she took a poisoning?

He went round to the great hall, and stopped dead at the sight which confronted him. Miss Callow was on the settle where he had left her, but now she sat bolt upright and even a little back-leaning. She had a forced and uncertain smile on her face and was saying, "*How do you do?*" in the tones of one who has made the same observation at least three times with no response. And advancing on her wordlessly, a step at a time with stops between, was Meadows. As a child Lance had learned that if one street urchin wishes to disconcert another he need only stare fixedly at the other's forehead, close over the eyes. The victim will try to meet the other's gaze and cannot; nothing makes a man appear more mad than a fixed and unreachable stare like that. He saw here that one need not be an urchin to be disconcerted. Miss Callow was more than disconcerted; if she didn't bolt she would faint, and now. "Meadows!"

Meadows glanced at him and the spell was broken.

“Mr. Meadows, Miss Callow.”

Meadows said, “That face—”

“It impresses me too,” said Lance quickly, and took Miss Callow’s hand. “We’d best be getting back to Minden.” As she turned eagerly and gratefully to him, Lance understood what had happened. Meadows, irresistibly off on his Hippocratic urge, had seen the sprinkle of acne across her brow and down the sides of her nose. Single-minded as he was, he must have concluded that this was a patient; and with dedication such as his, a patient is not a person, but a disease. The chances are good that there had been nothing in his mind at all as he crossed the room toward her except lists of ingredients from his impulsive apothecary. None of this was explicable, hence: “He’s interested in you,” in a quick whisper, and to the anxious Meadows, “I’ll bring her back. Soon.” and he whisked her out.

“He frightened me,” she said candidly when they reached the footbridge.

“Only mysteries fear a scientist,” said Lance; it was one of Barrowbridge’s saws. “He was interested in you, that’s all.”

“My,” she breathed, “what has come over me these days?”

Nothing yet, he said, but silently. He felt miserable. He liked plans which worked out.

“We needn’t walk so fast,” she said a little breathlessly. “Sir Gregory has gone to London with Miss Elaine, and cook can take care of the other two.”

“I must hurry back. He’ll need me. He’s doing a great work.”

“Oh. Oh dear, what is it?”

“I can’t tell you until it’s finished.”

“Oh of course; I’m sorry. ...You needn’t walk all the way to Minden, Captain. Not if it will obstruct your work.”

“Why, I couldn’t think of—”

“Please. I shall be safe; it’s still broad daylight. And with Sir Gregory not there—well, you needn’t. Really.”

He knew she didn’t mean a word of it, but he stopped and doffed his hat. “Very well, then; it’s most thoughtful of you, Miss Callow.”

“Good-by,” she said wistfully, and, “Tomorrow?”

He had a horrid intuition that if he denied her she would follow him home. "Tomorrow," he said, the breathy, stringed-instrument way.

He watched her go, heartily wishing she would fall into the brook, wishing he were back in London. London ... whatever was going on in London by this time? He must ride for the post.

He strolled slowly back to the house. A hangdog Meadows awaited him. "I say, old man, I was a boor. No, don't be decent about it. I was. I don't know what's got into me."

"You've been working too hard."

"Perhaps I ought to go back to London and—"

"I haven't been helping you enough, that's all."

"Oh, you have! I shouldn't be able to do anything without your ideas, your confidence in me."

"What confidence?" He couldn't help it; it slipped out.

"Ah," said Meadows, "you're pulling my leg. I say, that Miss Fallow—"

"Callow. She isn't fallow," said Lance with deep conviction.

"I just couldn't do anything else. Those eruptions on her; my, what I wouldn't give to have them here to work on. What is it?"

"Twonk's disease," said Lance soberly.

"Oh dear. Well, the poor thing. I'd like to help."

"Perhaps she's better off the way she is."

"You can't mean that!"

"I don't suppose I can." He turned to the door. "I have to go—you know." He went inside.

"Brave chap," murmured Meadows. He went to the lab to see if he could find, in Paracelsus, a reference to Twonk's disease.

Upstairs, Lance flung himself into Barrowbridge's great chair. The barrister looked at him questioningly and Lance simply shook his head.

"I wish I could help, lad."

"That's what Meadows said."

"He didn't!"

"That he did. I told him she had Twonk's disease, and

off he scurried to invent some foul concoction to cure her.”

“Got it!”

“Good heavens, sir!” Lance sank back; Barrowbridge’s sudden exclamation had bent him like a bow.

“A scandal you wanted, a scandal you’ll get.” Barrowbridge began to laugh, and then he began to talk.

It was warm and dark. The great hall was dimly lit by two candles, a lanthorn and the fireplace, and some stray light from the laboratory, where the interminable simmering and kilning proceeded regardless of the hour.

Lance led Miss Callow in. They paused and listened; all was quiet. He had extracted her from Minden without being seen, in the best romantic tradition—a pebble at her window, a whispered word. They had hardly spoken to one another on the way down, except for the heavy pulse that beat against him as he held her before him on his horse.

He took her hand and led her to the central bedroom, taking one of the candles as they passed the fireplace. Inside the room, he put down the candle and took her by the shoulders.

“Don’t be afraid,” he whispered.

She tried to speak, apparently could not. She shook her head.

“You get ready,” he said. He made a gesture.

“Don’t leave me alone.”

“You won’t be alone for long.” He slipped back into the hall, back through the kitchen, and up the stairs.

“That quickly?” Barrowbridge whispered.

Lance snapped his fingers to show how quickly. Barrowbridge got comfortable by his gimlet-hole. “You made no promises, nothing specific,” he ascertained.

“Nothing. I was completely misunderstood,” said Lance with satisfaction.

There came a stirring. “Look!” Lance dived across the bed and took over the gimlet-hole. He saw Meadows stop in the light, look to the right, look to the left, and then approach the bedroom, bearing in both hands before him, like a crown on a cushion, a capacious earthen bowl.

He went in.

Lance got a confused glance of rapidly moving figures,

and then Barrowbridge's hard old shoulder shunted him aside. There came a short piercing shriek and a reiterated "No! No! No!" and Meadows' irritated squeak, "Hold still, dash it all! I won't hurt you!"

"Once around," murmured Barrowbridge. "Twice around."

"Please!" Reluctantly, Barrowbridge yielded.

Lance saw the third round, the fourth. Miss Callow, revealing an astonishingly hairy body covered with great gobbets of yellow-green grease, shot past the bedroom door, with Meadows in hot pursuit, ladling further gobbets of his evil ointment at her and shrilling at her to hold fast. At last she slipped and fell; Meadows, turning sharply to follow her, slipped also and inverted his receptacle over them both. Miss Callow scuttled under the bedstead and out the other side, through the bedroom door, down the great hall, and out into the night as fast as her sturdy legs could carry her. Meadows staggered to the bedroom door and hung there panting and dripping.

A perfectly monstrous smell rose up and smote them. Lance coughed and stuffed a corner of his handkerchief into the hole.

The smell began to penetrate the walls. "Phoo! I never thought of that!"

"Why did he have to use so much?"

"You know Meadows. If a little is good, a lot is wonderful."

"Well this is wonderful," choked Barrowbridge.

"I'm sorry, sir. I have to get out."

"Why not stay here and be a sage and let me go out?"

"I'm sorry, sir." And Lance stumbled to the door.

Barrowbridge lay back and grinned wryly, and began to use the mechanisms he had learned for controlling pain and despair. They worked quite well on this minor thing.

Of Miss Callow there was no sign. Lance kept his distance and called from the other end of the hall. "The devil, Meadows! You didn't have to bath her in the stuff!"

"She wouldn't stay still," said Meadows. He was still breathing hard. "Didn't she *want* to heal those nasty things?"

"She may not have understood the exact nature of the

treatment. Didn't you explain at all?"

"I thought you said you'd do that."

"I said I'd get her ready. ... I'm sorry, Meadows, but we've got to clean this mess up, though short of burning down the house—"

"It isn't so bad," said Meadows judiciously. "I've had really bad smells going. I remember—"

"This is quite bad enough. Come."

Together they stripped the room, taking the bed apart, the carpet, the hangings, the chairs and the table. The evil decoction was splashed high on the walls, on the dresser mirror. Everything went. They dragged it all outside and piled it to be burned on the morrow when a fire would attract less attention. Lance set Meadows to smearing the walls and floors with soft soap, preparatory to their being scrubbed by Johnson in the morning, and disgustedly went to bed in the carriage house, curled up on the cushions of the trap.

It had not amused him, it had not pleased him. It had only been a lot of disgusting work.

"But worth it, I suppose," he thought wearily. "Whatever story she tells."

Midmorning, and the sound of wheels.

"I say, Courtenay, there's a—"

"I see it. Meadows, clear out, will you? I'll handle this."

"Who—it's that chap up the path, Sir Gregory Eustace, isn't it?"

"It is, and there's about to be the devil to pay,"

"But it was my—"

"Damn it, this is bad enough without you cluttering things up. Out of sight—*jump!*" he barked in the tones a bull-voiced, younger Barrowbridge used to use on his terrified office boy. Meadows muttered, "I say," but faintly, and jumped.

Sir Gregory picked his way across the bowling green. He was wearing light brown velvets with white piping and a powdered wig under his brown tricorne; he looked out of place, both for the place and the time of day. He seemed more than ever like an owl—soft, silent, a little ludicrous, unquestionably carnivorous.



“Good morning, Sir Gregory.”

“Ah, Courtenay.” His voice was flat, uninflected. He always spoke in short bursts of syllables, rapidly, with long spaces between. Unquestionably, he did not hoot. “Unpleasant business. Nice day. Too bad.”

“Too bad,” said Lance, utilizing still another of his mentor’s techniques.

“Unforgivable. All over London. Nine-day wonder. Girl’s a fool. Want you to know full extent. Damage. Never heard of such nonsense.”

Lance was silent this time. He shrugged humbly.

“Got her here. Carriage. Face to face, what? Whole story. Only right.”

“As you say, sir.”

“Deuced humiliating.”

“Yes, sir, it is, and I couldn’t be more sorry,” said Lance in tones which brought sincerity upgushing from his very shoe-tops.

Sir Gregory raised his hand and made a slight gesture. He was apparently being watched from the carriage, because the door opened instantly and the passenger alighted, and with head bowed, with reluctant feet, with shamed tears half-dried on the blushing cheeks, Elaine Eustace crossed the bowling green.

*Elaine Eustace?*

Lance stepped back a pace to lay his hand on the wooden balustrade behind him—something solid, something real. Numbly, he waited.

Frozen, her father waited.

She came and stood before them, put her hands behind her, and hid her face in her ruffled collar.

“Tell him, Elaine. Everything.”

The imprisoning lashes raised far enough to release a swift screened search for Lance’s face, and dropped again. She said, in a soprano whisper, “I—” and then even that faint sound failed her, and she stood crying silently.

“Come, girl!”

Her mouth opened and closed; nothing else about her moved but her slow tears.

Sir Gregory made an extremely small but acutely impatient gesture. Lance managed to get his eyes off the girl

and meet the frosted owl's eyes. Sir Gregory moved his head sharply and Lance followed the gesture, and the baronet, a few yards. The girl remained standing precisely where she was, facing the nothingness where the men were not, just as helpless, just as crushed.

"Dammit," said the baronet, and wet his little lips. "Heavy father. Not my style. Don't know how, ackshly. What? Can't stand this. But." He wet his lips again. Lance thought after a time that he had no more to say, it took him so long. "But Right's right, what? Can't have it. Agree?" He flicked an unhappy glance at the girl. "Make amends. Put it right. Want to have a shot? I can't. I'll wait."

Very, very carefully, Lance phrased his question. "Exactly what do you want me to do, sir?"

"Get the story. All of it." Suddenly the owl countenance looked downdrawn and miserable. "No mother, y'know. Dashed nuisance. Go on, go on. Don't take any. Nonsense, what?"

"I'll—try, sir."

Sir Gregory turned away and turned back. "I say, Courtenay."

"Yes, sir."

"No need to be harsh, what? Sensitive, girls. Never know." He made an abrupt, disgusted sound and strode back up to the carriage as fast as his neat little legs would carry him.

Then he returned to the girl. What prompted him to do so, he did not know, but he reached out and took her hand. He led her away from the house to the grove of willows and poplars which grew by the stream, and as if she were made of blown glass, helped her onto the wide swing which hung over the bank. She was submissive, almost inert, but once he had her ensconced and had slipped to the seat beside her, she gave a funny, little-girl wiggle and hunkered back a more comfortable inch. Then she was still again, watching with her nearly closed eyes the hands on her lap, which lay strangely, not folded but one upon the other with the palms up. She had stopped crying.

One of her curls fell forward off her shoulder and swung to her cheek, where it clung.

Lance said softly, "Your father wants you to tell me

something. Tell me whatever you like.”

She said nothing.

“Maybe you’d rather not tell me,” Lance said, rather stupidly, he thought. “But if you don’t, I’ll have to know what to say to Sir Gregory.”

Still she said nothing and made no move, but by some extra sense, he knew there was a change. She was no longer just sitting; she was waiting.

Impulsively, recalling more with his fingers than with his mind how it had been to take her hand, he said, “Would you like to hold my hand while you tell me?”

She said, not moving her head and barely her mouth, “Da can see.”

“I think that would be all right.”

“Not if I reached for your hand.”

“Well then!” and he took her hand. She then raised her lashes and looked at him with her eyes wide open. He all but gasped. He had never seen her eyes before. He had hardly seen her before. The thing lasted perhaps a tenth of a second, and perhaps its effect on him was neither deep nor important, but he knew it was permanent. After that bright blaze, her eyes hid away again and she gave her gaze back to the hand he had left in her lap.

“Now can you tell me what this is about?”

“I don’t know. I ... want to.”

“Then do.”

“I want to tell you all of it.” Her voice was steady but almost inaudible, and pitched surprisingly low for a child. If she was a child. He tried very hard to imagine how this must be for her, an unaccustomed exercise for him. “But there’s a part I can’t say,” she whispered.

He recalled how Barrowbridge used to shock the truth out of reluctant clients, and tried a very gentle version of the same: “What’s the part you can’t say? *Say it!*”

“I love you.” She laughed then, perhaps four pure clear syllables before the tears returned most unfairly, without warning, so that she choked and had to cough. He had no clean handkerchief to offer (and for that, made a solemn vow) and she tried awkwardly to reach one which peeped out of her puffed left sleeve with her free left hand. He released the hand he held but she would not remove it, so

he reached over and plucked out the handkerchief and handed it to her. "Oh dear, I'm just awful," she said miserably, and in the same breath, without pause, and with nothing but joy, "I said it, didn't I?"

"I'm very pleased you said it. Is that what your father wanted you to tell me?"

"I don't think so. I have to tell you what I did yesterday." There followed a continuous rush of words so rapid and confusing that at first Lance was lost totally, and his impulse was to stop her and make her start over. But then he began picking up things from context, until abruptly the whole picture cleared: "Barby that's my sister thought of the armor," was the way she began, "and that made me hurt inside because it was silly but it was a very beautiful and right thing to think about you and I should have thought of it, and I hated her because she did it instead. Bella that's my other sister always saw you coming up the path, riding or walking, every time you came, early, late, Barby saw you first, and that hurt me inside too because I was the one who should have seen you coming every time if I really love you I'd *know* when you were coming and I'd hate to think I didn't." The blaze of eyes came and was gone, so quickly that he almost missed it. "I hurt and that was silly because they're just children and don't know *how* to love or anything like that. Then I hurt about Callow, *Miss Callow* I should say, she had you to herself all the time almost every single day for hours and hours. But I thought about that and it stopped hurting quite so much because who could love *Miss Callow*? and besides I suddenly thought you were with *Miss Callow* so you could talk and talk about me. *Please* don't say if you did or didn't, I don't want to know." She swung a foot, pointed the toe and swung it again, failing to reach the turf. "Swing us. *Please*?"

"I beg your—? Oh." He set them to swinging gently. Her left hand still slept curled in her lap like a pink shell, and still she spoke down into it, gazed down into it, as if filling it carefully with the little seeds of her words. "So I hurt about Barby and about Bella and about Callow excuse me, *Miss Callow*. Then Da took me to London and I thought of something so wonderful I almost couldn't sleep the whole night before. And I did it, I never thought everybody would

be upset. I told everybody, just everybody I could, that I was to be married. Married, married, married to you.” This time it was not a blaze, a flash; it was a long, careful, wide-eyed examination of his face, his mouth, the tilt of his head, up to his hair, down to his chin and around its point. During it he sat steady and watched her eyes doing this careful thing, knowing that the slightest misconstrued quiver of a cheek, shift of a lip, tension of jaw and temple, might wound her beyond bearing. He was not aware of trying not to wound her; he simply knew he could. He did not. When she dropped her gaze it was like putting down a weight; her very shoulders slumped with relief.

“Da began to hear about it at teatime, and oh, dozens of times after that. People just flocked around us. Some of them knew you. Da was kind while they were doing it. He told them they must have me mixed up with someone else. Or he joked, he said, “Yes, and I’m to marry the Princess of Wales.” He never, he never once said I was a little liar. And thief too.”

*“Thief?”*

“The ring. Oh—da said I must tell you specially about the ring and show it to you.” Deftly, she unbuttoned a small tight pocket in her waistband and extracted a cushion of silk and handed it to him. Being as careful as she had been not to remove the contact of their hands, he worked it open and found himself staring thunderstruck at a curiously wrought ring, the only one carrying both silver and gold that he had ever instinctively liked. And it bore a diamond cut like a teardrop, an immense thing weighing seven karats or better. “It was Mother’s ring,” she explained. “I took it the night before we left, and then wherever we went, whenever I could be out of sight for a second, I told people.”

“—that we were engaged, you and I, and with this?”

She nodded briefly, and tumbled along with her narrative, and a good thing too; Lance didn’t know whether to laugh or drop his jaw or what to say; he sat listening, and watching the hard beams of the jewel as the swing shifted about amongst the leaf-shadows and the freckled sun between. Oh God, how they must be talking in London! And Barrowbridge had been looking for scandal, had he? “Da was kind when the people were talking to us but all the way

back in the carriage—*all* the way back—he told me how wicked it was for me to do that. To be a liar and a thief was only the first small part of it, he said. He said I might have done you some terrible damage. He said it wasn't fair to a young man to tell the world he had such a stone. He said you'd have every right to be angry. What's a jactitation?"

"A *what?*"

"You frightened me! ... Didn't I say it right?"

"Who told you about jactitation?"

"I don't know. Somebody. Everybody. They're all talking about it in London. Somebody got one," she said, uncaring. "They said you could get one against me, about four different people said that to me, to tease. What is it?"

"A tease," he said, and smiled it away. *So somebody got one*, he exulted. The exultation was sufficient to handle this and any other situation which might present itself this wonderful day. "Is that all you were to tell me?"

"Yes."

"Am I angry?"

"You ... you don't *look* angry," she said hopefully.

"Come along to your father and we'll see how angry I am."

She said, as if she were still in the throes of her narrative, as if she had not claimed to have finished it, "And he said the worst thing I might have done would be to spoil it for you if you were engaged to someone else."

At that he laughed. "I'm not, however. Would you be sorry if you'd done that one thing, though?"

"I keep giving you things to hate me for ..." she said, appalled, and, "No I wouldn't; I'd be glad, but don't tell Da I said that."

He laughed again, slipped off the swing, held out both his hands. She took them and skipped down and for a perilous moment held tight and stood close; he thought he was going to kiss her and he thought that she was going to cry. "Don't cry," he whispered to her. "If you cry, you're a child."

"I'm almost fifteen," she said coolly, and then she did cry, two hot little tears on each side. She scrubbed angrily at them with her handkerchief. "I'm just being sentimental," she pouted, for reasons of her mysterious own.

He took her hand and because he knew she wanted to be stately and chastened, he perversely ran with her up to the carriage, so that she arrived high-colored and laughing and begging him to stop. He saw the delight in the baronet's face and the swift overlay of the disciplinarian. "Your daughter, sir," he said in courtly fashion, handing her up.

"Have you told Captain Courtenay everything?"

"Yes, Da."

"I accept responsibility, Captain. If I may make amends. Letters to anyone. Restitution. What?"

"You may grant a great favor, sir."

"Granted. Quite. What is it?"

"But it would be granted to Miss Elaine, sir, and not to me."

"Ask."

"Punish her no more. She now understands, and I am quite unharmed."

Down climbed the baronet, and brought his again unreadable little face close to Lance's. "That favor's granted neither of you, but to me. Well you know it." And Lance knew he had played this right, like a Barrowbridge.

He said, "So much the better, sir; it will make us all three happy."

"Very deft tongue. Future for you. Assist any way. Call on me."

"You are most kind, Sir Gregory."

"Nonsense," said the baronet, climbed into his carriage and was off. Lance saw the girl's head as it was put shyly out of the carriage and snatched swiftly back.

He returned to the house, shaking his head and smiling to himself.

"Meadows! I say—Meadows!"

No answer. He went to the door of the laboratory wing. "Meadows?"

Something moved in a far corner. Lance went in, laughing. "You can come out now, old chap. It's—oh dear."

He found himself face to face with Hepzibah Callow.

## 10.

“MISS CALLOW!”

“I’ve come back,” she said, and showed her teeth. Her eyes were narrowed and they glittered. She was garbed in a voluminous drapery of an oriental cast and a material heavy and ornate enough to be totally unsuitable to the time of year. On second inspection, it was, in its toga-like folds, totally unsuitable to be a garment at all. “It’s a tapestry,” she informed him, aware of his inspection, “from the north room at Minden. The upstairs maid put it out to sun behind the stables yesterday and must have forgotten it. Thank heaven.”

“We ... we burned your clothes,” he said, as the only thing he could think of to say. Which reminded him of the reason for their cremation, which brought back the veritable diapason of that earth-shaking, petal-shriveling, light-bending miasma, which in turn made it clear to him that he recognized the odor not exclusively in memory. Miss Callow still smelt like the midden of an almshouse.

“Ah, clothes,” she said disdainfully, and before he could shriek, *Stop!* she shrugged her shoulders and let the heavy folds fall to her waist. “Look,” she said breathlessly, “Look at me.”

He had averted his face. “Miss Callow, please ...”

“Look, look,” she said insistently. “In art modesty has no place, nor in nature, nor in science ...” She drew a deep breath. “Nor in science, I say. Look, look, look what you’ve done to me.”

So he looked and absorbed first the fact that she was neither bird nor reptile; but this was a generality. His second observation was that the skin affliction on her face was indeed repeated on her body, as Meadows had reported, though it was slight and looked harmless. It was also un-cured. “It’s wonderful,” she said, closing her eyes ecstatically, “isn’t it? Wonderful ...”

“I suppose it is,” he said inanely, “What is wonderful?”

“Why the, you know. Hair,” she said hardily; art,



science, or natural philosophy to the contrary, “hair” was to her an improper word when describing anything below the earlobes.

“I don’t see any hair,” he said bluntly.

“Isn’t it *wonderful*?”

He understood. “Meadows!” he bellowed. “Mead—*dows!*”

“Ek?” said the window timidly. He looked and saw the top of Meadows’ head, down to the eyebrows, protruding above the sill.

“Come here, Meadows, hurry!”

The head rose slowly and steadily as if floated in a filling bowl until the eyes were discovered. “My word!” it said faintly, and disappeared.

“Half a mo’,” Lance said to the governess, flung out of the laboratory and collared Meadows, who was scuttling pellmell for the footbridge. “Come back, hang it all!”

“She’ll put out my eyes!” wailed Meadows.

“I will if you don’t come. Cheer up, old chap; it’s all right.” He walked the reluctant alchemist back into the laboratory where, faced with the vision which stood in the center of the room like some mad variation of the new classicism, Meadows put his eyes in his fists and his fists on Lance’s shoulderblades and they approached her like a quadruped.

“Ah, Mr. Meadows. Look—do look,” coaxed Miss Callow, making it even more unavoidable. Meadows, peeked, ducked, rose, peered, then at last set aside his human screen and frankly examined the specimen. “Oh, I say, Courtenay, this is extrawdnry. No hair, what?”

“A miracle,” said Miss Callow. “Magic. Look here.” She turned her head and put back her side locks. She had a bald spot as broad as a hand on the back of her head. “Even here. Not that I mind. My fault, really; I wasn’t helping. You, and you, dear Lance, are the two most tactful gentlemen I have ever met.”

Lance had thought himself beyond shock, but this proved him wrong. “We’re *what*?”

“Ah, that’s like you, modest, too,” she beamed. “You knew all along that you couldn’t mention such a thing as my—as all that, well, hair. You knew so much better than I

what would help, and how to go about it. Is it ... off for good, do you imagine?"

Lance and Meadows met one another's eyes; Meadows shrugged. "Perhaps not," Lance translated. "But Meadows can make up more for you if you ever—I say, Meadows, you *can* make up more?"

"I certainly jolly well positively—I really don't know," said Meadows. "I say, she—that is, it does smell a bit."

"Come along with me, Miss Callow. I'll have Johnson sluice you down. She did wonders with the bedroom walls this morning." Miss Callow started to follow him, almost stumbled on the dragging ends of her drapery, and brought them up over her shoulders with, Lance thought, some reluctance. He squired her into the kitchen and gave explicit instructions to Johnson, whose eyes and nostrils vied with one another for the most expansion while he talked. He left them and returned to the laboratory, where Meadows was already at work mixing.

"Jolly good job. Meadows. What's in the filth—the stuff, anyway?"

"A lot of things," said Meadows abstractedly, clearing off a bit of bench-space with a sweep of his forearm. "I've a bit left in the bottom of this bowl." He raised the lid of the bowl and Lance sprang and pressed it down with both hands.

"Well, d'ye suppose you could work up some more and keep track and write out a receipt, so much of this, so much of that?"

"If you'd like."

"I'd like," said Lance. "Meadows, m'boy, you have discovered how to turn rancid goose-grease into gold. If you can get that receipt we'll hire somebody to put it up for us in little round boxes and sell it in the apothecary shops for two shillings an ounce."

"I say, what a lark!"

"Well then, call it a lark if you will. But do it. I'll take care of all the trading part, and share with you, say twenty percentum to eighty?"

"I wouldn't think of taking such a share," said Meadows. "Not from you, my dear chap."

"You deserve it. After all, you invented it."

“I couldn’t have, without you.”

“I can’t argue money with you, old man,” Lance said warmly, wondering if he could hold the fool at seventy-five.

“Well, just make mine ten percentum,” said Meadows. “I say, I must open this flask of ox-musk now, and I rather think you won’t care for it.”

Lance retreated, exultant.

So was launched one of the happiest periods of Lance Courtenay’s life—five quietly eventful years, which began with the receipt of a letter from Beasley, enclosed in a heavy packet of half banknotes, the government-approved method of sending currency to foil the highwayman:

*Mr. Lance Captain Courtenay, dear Sir:*

*Herewith my warmest Compliments and the inclosed, id est £400 in banknotes duly halved, the rest despatched by post rider to Messrs. Worthington of Westerham, the which I understand is within an hour’s ride from your holding. Mr. Gerald Worthington is apprised of your coming, and in possession of a description of you, a tracing of your Signature-in-Hand, and a receipt on which I trust you will make your Mark and return to me.*

*By which you will have deduced, my Dear Sir, the successful conclusion of our Enterprise. Having submitted her Complaint against Mr. Augustus John Hervey to the Ecclesiastical Court, Milady Chudleigh did thereupon swear unto her Spinsterhood. Mr. Hervey, who was there present, did accept the Censure of said Court in good part, and give his Word that he would henceforth and forever Cease and Desist from repetition of the Offense, to wit, boastfully and groundlessly Publishing as a Fact a Relationship now held, in view of said oath, to be a Nullity.*

*Milady and the good Evelyn Pierrepont, Duke of Kingston-upon-Hull, entered into*

*Matrimony on the 17th instant and on the 18th did embark for Calais, accompanied by Miss Axelrood, who at our last Meeting sent you her Affectionate Regards.*

*Please remember my Suggestion concerning a chair for you in my Offices, should such Activity appeal to you at any future time. It has been Edifying and Pleasant to be, and is to remain,*

*Yr. Obt. Svt, Sir,*

*Buggley Beasley.*

It was Lance's Midas phase. Everything he touched thrived and showered him with success. Evelyn Meadows departed to institute production facilities for what was nearly called My Darling Courtenay Hair and Stubble Ointment for Gentlemen and Ladies—a christening suggestion by Miss Callow and approved by Meadows—but which at length reached the market as Milady Hepzibah's Salve, a Hound to the Hairs, when Miss Callow was at length convinced that Lance, as young country gentleman, could not afford to be connected publicly with a proprietary toiletry. Miss Callow left her post and followed Meadows to London, partly because of her idolatry, and partly to be near a source of supply, for she grew hair at an amazing rate. She became so anxious for the success of the enterprise that she took it upon herself to represent it in the back rooms of apothecaries all over the County of London, where in the interest of science she exhibited her calculated pattern of pilation and depilation to startled shopkeepers.

She was, indeed, one of the happiest happenstances of those fine years. For example, when Evelyn Meadows fled to America, she took over the Miss Hepzibah business and trebled it in a month, for all her pique at Lance, who had arranged (through Sir Gregory) the position of Collection Officer in the Tax Office in Boston so that Meadows could be kept out of trouble while his Cousin Charles cooled down. Cousin Charles had come bursting out of Milan looking for Evelyn's ears to box, for having been idling in the Downs while their inheritance was snapped out from under them by the infamous Miss Chudleigh. He even came

to Featherfront looking for Evelyn, without success. He was a precise little man who affected linen without a pleat, a ruffle, or a single seam more than it took to hold it together. He left a message for Evelyn to the effect that if their uncle predeceased the new Countess and left her with all that money to spend, he, Charles, would flay him, Evelyn, with a shoehorn even if it took a week. He then returned to Milan.

Wonderful years ... there was what came to be known as the Hobby. Perhaps it was Beasley who caused it, through the letter he got from Lance acknowledging the £400, in which he thanked the barrister and declined his offer: ... *I am interested in the Law only as it piques my Curiosity, and should be considered as a Collector thereof.* Or perhaps Barrowbridge, in drafting the letter for him, secretly hoped for such a result. However it came about, Lance gained a small, highly select, and quiet reputation for being able to come up with the most surprising solutions for knotty problems at law—or in avoidance thereof. “Astonishin’ chap,” the young bloods at the Fish and Staff would tell one another. “Get into a tacky patch, tip off old Lance, let him buzz off to the hills and ruminate a bit, and next thing y’know, he’s come up with the kind of answer nobody expects—’specially if you didn’t expect any answer at all. And know what? by Jove, you can’t give him a penny for it.”

You couldn’t give him a penny for it. But you might find out he needed another horse. He might sportingly be intrigued in an investment in a spice ship, any profits to be taken in his name, any losses to be borne by grateful old you. You might be able to divine the name of his tailor, and somehow think of dropping around and paying the fellow, to give old Lance a pleasant surprise when next he was in the City. Perhaps you’d visit him in his little diggings in the Downs and find him wistful about the scratchy condition of his grounds, and send over the gardener and some helpers from your manse for a week or two. Such a decent chap, you wondered how he ever made the connections he did. Want some neat and necessary surgery with a knitting needle? He knew a woman in Bermondsey who—Want to sell off a bit of the silver plate until the guv’nor comes through with the next quarterly? Lance could steer you to a

chap in Cheapside who'd give you a decent price without a word, and you'd *know* the stuff would never be seen in England again.

But where he shone was in the dustiest reaches of law. "Mr. Barrowbridge," he said one evening after his return from London, "met a chap at Drury Lane who's in a bit of a stew. Seems he's married."

"Can't help him," said Barrowbridge sleepily. As time went on, he slept even more, though the sleep was lighter; he was approaching a condition of perpetual light trance, a constant drowse through which his mind flickered and flashed like summer lightning.

"He's Oswald Marryat, the French brandy chap. Got two castles and a race course of his own."

"We can help him," Barrowbridge said immediately. "What's saddened him?"

"This marriage of his. Third wife, y'know. He's afraid his second wife will find out about it."

"And charge bigamy, what? I presume there's a first wife, too."

"Not any more. She just died. Her relations feel she should have more of an estate out of it. They're the ones who are hinting at telling the second wife about the third wife."

Barrowbridge frowned while his mind tested, turned, threaded and reviewed. "That's not bigamy, lad, that's trigonometry. ...Who's the second wife? Where's she come from?"

"I think he said her mother was married to his Uncle Oswald."

Barrowbridge's eyes opened abruptly. "Really ... I say, how tidy d'ye suppose their marriage records are?"

"Not very, I'd imagine. He's only recently made his pile. They're nobodys, actually. Village folk."

"Do you tell your Mr. Marryat," said Barrowbridge, "that if he can arrange things so that he changes places in the records with his uncle of the same name, his troubles are over."

"Over how?"

"Why, by an honest accident, unbeknownst to himself, you might say, his second wife is his niece. Now that's

within the prohibited degree, and though the marriage isn't void, it's readily voidable, and on the record, too, without her knowledge or appearance. Get him to a good barrister and have that done."

"Very well, but wouldn't it call attention to his bigamy?"

"Not if he brought the action to void. Ignorance of consanguinity is a defence; its being his action makes it good faith. They'll void."

"I'm sorry, sir; I still don't understand how voiding that marriage solves his problem."

"Well, lad I'll spell it out for you. His dead wife's relations can't bring charges for bigamy when his second marriage is a nullity."

"Ah, I see. And what about the third marriage? He was married to her while the second marriage existed."

"The second marriage never existed, now we've voided it."

"And what about the third marriage, in regard to the first?"

"First one's dead. Do you go tell Marryat instantly to become his own uncle. Slide me that chamber, will you, lad?"

And so when the liberated Mr. Marryat found out that Lance did not have a cellar large enough for the cases of fine brandy he wished to give him, he had one dug for him.

One of the pleasantest things about the Hobby was the good relations Lance set up with lawyers. He never missed an opportunity to send the people involved to lawyers, virtually never solved any but the most simple problems with advice alone. As a result lawyers cultivated him, added to his "collection" of uncommon law, and in general made things as happy for him as they could. Beasley early became one of his staunchest and most voluble admirers. "Chap practically a beardless youth," he would say at the Club, "and thinks like a Lord Advocate. You'd think he'd been at the bar for fifty years."

Splendid years. ... There was Minden, Sir Gregory, Elaine. Despite the fact that he associated with the little baronet primarily for his position and influence, however limited, he was not immune to the man's surprisingly deep

enthusiasm for the immense history he was compiling. Sir Gregory read Latin and Greek with familiarity and French as if he had been born to it, and many a literary and historical tag Lance carried away with him, to be hoarded and flashed briefly as the circumstance offered itself in London—that is, the presence in a gathering of just the right level of folk who could be and should be impressed by a young man's scholarly attributes, and the absence of scholars. Yet at times he came away bemused, for the moment oriented in the swell and change of culture against culture, the pressure of Rome against the world around her; the pinching off of the Parthians and the explosive rise of the Sassanian Persians which, with the ambition of the Teutonic tribes, Sir Gregory held responsible for the dissolution of the Roman Empire, despite its power in subsequent centuries. These spells of identification with history and humanity were transient but heady, and Lance was confirmed in his belief that Sir Gregory was a great if unimportant little man, whose history of Rome would be, if nothing else, a phenomenon, like a stone column in a desert; useless in itself but a good deal more than other men could boast of.

Elaine became a lady. Her eyes and her hair grew brighter and her figure ripe; in one way only did she not change, and that was only because it was initially a state of completeness: her devoted constancy to Lance. Isolated as she was with her sisters and a series of genteel tutors, she had no opportunity to acquire fashionable guiles and tactics, no wish or need for them. She loved Lance openly and wholeheartedly. It was one of those rare affections seen sometimes in the religious recluse, the artist and the scholar, wherein to love is sufficient, to be loved inconceivable. Indeed, her emotion for Lance fed her quite as adequately as her father's engrossment in dead Italians fed him. Lance struck a posture of grave regard when he was with her, and permitted no peaks on this particular plateau. He had brief moments of regret that her father was such a small baronet and his holdings so unimpressive, else this might have been one of the great loves of the period. Sir Gregory permitted him unlimited freedom with the girl, perhaps sensing Lance's attitude, perhaps, in his preoccupations, genuinely unaware that he might be



expected to do otherwise.

Bella and Barbara likewise blossomed, and each had her extremes of passion for Lance, each more than once; but this was a game, part of the atmosphere, and there was no question in their minds as to whose "property" he was.

During those years there were disappointments for Lance, but in the long run they served only to etch in the finer shadows and put his greater contentment in perspective. Chief among these shadows was a perpetual and nagging pique at the new Countess of Kingston and her ward Miss Axelrood, which became inflamed after 1773, when the Duke died. Completely overlooking the handsome remuneration he had already received, he began to believe he had been "had"—that his entire aim in the operation had been to secure the implied promise that they would see to it he was circulated about, placed next to the mighty, and even given entree at court. The continued residence abroad of the Kingston ménage made this impossible, and although he kept up his visits to Blanton House and a few others of that ilk, his acquaintance in the City did not expand very much. Barrowbridge was of course no longer in a position to pressure and black—well, grey-mail him into high society; so all things considered, these were years of consolidation, of retrenchment, wherein he became far more the country gentleman and less the man-about-town. His salve enterprise thrived, and his income from it increased, even after he halved his interest by the sale of manufacturing rights to an apothecary in Soho who had married Miss Callow primarily out of a desire to retain for himself the displays of the salve's effectiveness. It was rumored that he executed, in a *mezzo-relievo* of skin and hair, a magnificent St. George and Dragon on her back and hips, but Lance was content to relegate this to fancy and eschewed his privilege, unquestionable even now, to see for himself.

In the fall of 1775, which marked Lance's fifth season at Featherfront, he returned from Minden one evening to find a dusty horse with the reins over its head clomping unforgivably about upon the bowling green. His occasional man Hicks had gone for the post and there was apparently no one about but Johnson, who had always expressed herself terrified of horses. Cursing and grumbling, Lance

captured the animal and led it to the stable yard, where he tethered it.

Returning to the front of the house, he rounded the corner by the bayberry bush and was confounded by the explosion, as if out of the ground, of a leaping, yelling figure wearing a long headdress of brilliantly dyed feathers, leathern leggings which left the buttocks bare, and a fringed buckskin shirt. This apparition brandished a small, long-handled, and apparently very sharp axe, and with its other hand cupped over its shrieking mouth, created a wavering ululation so shocking in effect that Lance's leap upward threatened his very shoe-buckles. He staggered back into the zinnia bed and put his shoulders against the house lest he fall in a faint, and stood there awaiting death. His mouth was dry and his lips drew back and twitched against his upper teeth; he stopped breathing.

The nightmare creature bounded about in a large semicircle, pounding its mouth, pounding its chest, waving the tomahawk aloft and plunging it into the ground, cutting great gobbets out of the already damaged green, and arriving at last face to face with Lance, with the axe raised for its terminal coup. It was a tableau for a horrid frozen instant and then the red Indian said, "Oh, I say, old chap, I mean, don't smile at me like that, you make me feel contemptible."

"Meadows!"

"I mean, I should jolly well've known I couldn't make you turn a hair, what? Not you."

"What the devil are you doing in that outlandish ... the deuce do you mean by chopping up my bloody bowling green ... tie up your ruddy horse ... come from anyway?" It all burst from Lance with apparent simultaneity, and the savage figure backed away from the torrent, fluttering his hands uselessly in front of him. The tomahawk, fastened to his wrist with a thong, slipped from his fingers, swung down and gashed his thigh. "Oh, I say. This bloody thing's all bloody," he whimpered, separating the cut edges of legging and flesh. Again there was tableau as they stared at one another, and suddenly they were pounding each other on the back: "I say, it is good to see you, whatever in the world, why didn't you write?"

"Come in, dammit," said Lance. "No—wait; can you show me that ... that dance thing again?"

"Rather good, what? But I am bleeding a bit."

"Hang the bleeding. We'll have it put right in a trice. Do you just show me how one of those howling savages enters a house."

The effect, even though expected, actually frightened Lance for a moment. He followed the howling, capering figure into the great hall, seeing at the far end the horrified figure of Johnson disappear behind a slammed door. Even over the uproar Meadows was making, he could hear other doors bang in rapid succession—the kitchen, the pantry, the back kitchen, the scullery, the wood-room, and finally the rear exit. He wondered how far she would get before she turned back. He was also aware of the rattling intake of breath discernable in the area of the gimlet hole, which was his reason for asking the encore. Delighted, he fell back on the settle and brought surcease: "Well enough, old chap, look out, you'll have my mantel cloven. I say, stop! old boy—enough!"

Dripping sweat and blood and panting like a bellows, Meadows ceased, and Lance went to the kitchen to fetch water and cloth to bind him up. And while he did so, Meadows, with many discursions and chronological trackings back and trackings forth, told of his adventures in America.

It appeared that Boston *circa* 1770 was not what he and Sir Gregory and Lance had thought—at least, not for a Crown tax collector. "Place is positively seething, I mean. Chaps rushing about burning M.P.'s in effigy and that sort of thing. Politeness doesn't count a bit there, y'know. After all, one's just doing one's duty, but the very nicest people are likely to get positively rude when one asks for taxes, even if one apologizes first." He had stumbled along exposing himself to a minimum of fury on the one hand from the colonists and on the other from his superiors, until he had his bright idea. His income (a fund from his uncle the Duke of Kingston), plus his small share of the large amount paid as royalty on the salve, and his salary, had been just sufficient to carry him in his deception for nearly four years. He would make his rounds, but in all but a few cases this

was purely a social act. He would then return to his office, count out what moneys he had, and give them together with doctored books to his superiors. He was helped in this incredible charity by two factors: his predecessors had not been able to collect even this pittance, and his superiors could not understand bookkeeping. And as long as the people paid no taxes and the collectors received them, Meadows was left alone. His deception was revealed in October of 1774, when the last act of the fleeing tax commissioners was actually to throw him into the river Charles for having softened the King's hand on these rebels by leading them into non-payment of excises. There were more formal punishments in the *codus lex*, of course, but they all took time, and time was what the commissioners had not at the moment. The Massachusetts Assembly was prorogued clean out of existence, and the hapless Meadows was, as reported, thrown into the Charles by the commissioners on their way to safety on board the anchored men-of-war. And as if this were not tragedy enough for one night, when he paddled ashore and hauled himself, exhausted and chilled, down the riotous streets toward his lodgings, he was recognized as a tax collector by a band of patriots, who unhesitatingly carried him back and threw him into the Charles again. This time he swam out to a British frigate, where first the galley-dregs were thrown upon him by accident and next some bored shipbound grenadiers started potting at him with their muskets. He cried long live George III until bubbles began to appear between the syllables and they at last took pity and grappled him aboard.

Three days later he was able to join an armed shore party and make his way to his lodgings to pick up his things, only to find that looters had preceded him, and all that was left was his Indian costume. Resignedly he took it along because it was all he had to show for four and a half years in the government service, and because it occurred to him that it might amuse old Lance Courtenay to see it in action. And so he had come back to England, and here he was.

Lance laughed unabashedly during this recital, and afterward promised to see to it that suit was instituted to

recover the tax money he had so nobly paid for the colonists, a suggestion which threw Meadows into blind panic on the instant. No, he would let well enough alone. What, try to present records for those years—itemize those tax payments? “It’s over, old man—finished. Don’t let’s live it again. Besides—dear dead uncle Evelyn’s dear old bank draught will be along in a fortnight. If I can put up with you for a day or so, I shall be all right.”

“You’re welcome, of course,” said Lance sincerely, thinking, I wonder if Hepzibah will take him off my hands ... I wonder if Sir Gregory can wangle something else for him ... has he no ruddy relatives? “What do you hear from your cousin Charles?”

“Oh, he’s back on the continent—Leghorn, this time, exporting exports and importing imports and all that. Which is jolly fine. Every time he hears a word about the Duchess Elizabeth he gets livid and can’t be polite. He can’t even be understood. He just makes noises.”

“What do you hear of her?”

“The last I heard she was being squired about by His Holiness Pope Clement the Fourteenth, but of course he’s dead now.”

“Surely it wasn’t true.”

“So they say. Oh, I don’t think there was anything ... you know. After all, she’s going on sixty, what?”

“Mm. ... Miss Axelrood still with her?”

“Always. And you don’t hear any gossip about *her*, by Jove. I don’t know just what she does, what? but she does it quietly.”

Lance didn’t know, and said so. He did know how quietly she could get into and out of an inn, and didn’t say so. He laughed suddenly.

The red Indian made a questioning sound.

“I was just thinking that it’s sort of amusing, the wheels-within-wheels thing, Meadows. The reason you’re strapped, waiting for a draught, is because the Duchess has the money. But the reason you get the money is that she doesn’t get it—and it all comes from the same place.”

“It’s a wonder she didn’t get it,” said Meadows, “the way she had him buffaloed. (American expression; good, what?) Not that she needs it.”

“Lord no.” The Kingston fortune was large indeed, and it was by no means all in frozen assets. Lance knew a bit more than most people just how large it was; Beasley had given him a draft of the Duke’s will to examine for loopholes, and he and Barrowbridge had fine-toothed it, curried it down, and delivered it shining; it was as final as the last trump. He laughed again. It had been Barrowbridge’s exclusive idea to continue Charles and Evelyn Meadows’ settlements and quarterly income; as heirs apparent (but for the Duchess) they might be angered if she got the bulk of the estate, and let them; but they might be dangerous if they got nothing. As for the other clause—that the Duchess would inherit the estate and keep it only so long as she did not remarry—that too was Barrowbridge’s idea, he knowing full well that the Duchess would so present it that it would appear to be a concession. Actually, he could not imagine a circumstance which would make that extraordinary women happier than to be hugely wealthy, free to go where she wished, do what she cared to do, and be forbidden to marry. ... But at the moment, Evelyn Meadows was his problem. “I say, you know dear old Hepzibah married.”

“Yes, I’d heard. Who’s the, ah, lucky chap?”

“Fellow named Suarno, Portugee or some such. Apothecary.” He laughed. “Interested in sculpture too, I’ve heard.”

“Sculpture, oh, I say. Always wanted to try my hand at sculpture.”

“Evelyn, you’re a very funny fellow sometimes,” said Lance, hardly able to contain himself. “We’ll ride up to the City tomorrow ... I say, you *do* have some other clothes?”

“Oh yes,” said Meadows, touching his great train of feathers. “These are just extras.”

So Lance took him to the City; and indeed it was an excellent idea; not only did Hepzibah take Meadows in, but it was all Lance could do to keep her from adding him to her household as well. It took all day, but at last he laughingly pried himself away, stopped laughing as the door closed, looked at the sky and then at his watch, and decided to ride home that very evening. And thus he rode into his destiny.

It happened some hours later, a mile along the bridle path from the Tatsfield Road; it happened to him as it happened to travelers all over England.

The shadow detached itself from the loom of dark between the poplars and became the outline of a horseman. "Stand," it said roughly, "and deliver."

Lance's mouth went dry, and his lips skinned back from his teeth and began a subtle quiver. His horse stood in shadow as deep as the highwayman's; had he been ten feet back or ten feet farther on, he would have been in pale moonlight.

He couldn't be seen.

The highwayman said, unmistakably cocking a horse pistol, "I'll not shoot thee, Lanky me lad, if thee'll talk to me. Wipe me away once more and so help me God on the cross ye're a dead man, and there'll be two o' us, for I'm dead already."

When he could—and it was a long tense time before he could—Lance cried, "Piggott! Piggott—is that really you?"

## 11.

"YE MIGHT SAY IT'S really I," said the old man, "and you might not. It's what's left o' me, at any rate."

"Ah, that's you, right enough. Come into the moon so I may see you ... Piggott, you look like hell itself."

"Ay, I live there." He looked at the pistol and put it away. "It ain't loaded, but coo, ain't it got a nice loud cock?"

"It has that; are you really a highwayman?"

"Na, lad; I just wanted to see thee, and ye're always more yourself when you're angry."

Lance had not realized how angry he was until he was moved to laugh at this and found it difficult. "Well by God," he said in a resurgence of astonishment, "Piggott ... where have you been, Piggott?"

"Hup town, down town, all around the square. Ah, lad, it doesn't matter. I ... give up the carriage. Got a nice price for 'er too. Came to my sister's daughter for a while. Fell ill a bit. You know; the years go by ... just now I'm up from Ickworth."

"Ickworth?" Something stirred in Lance's memory; he set it aside. He was going to speak but was interrupted by a spasm of coughing—deep, wrenching, sickly coughs, frightening to hear.

"Touch of frost," said Piggott after a time. "Might we move along, Lanky?"

"Yes, we'd better ... Piggott," he demanded, "why did you leave me?"

"It was what you wanted."

"I never said that!"

"D'ye recall that night, Lanky?"

"Of course I do."

"Then do you tell me what came about."

"Why, I went to Blanton House. When I came out you were gone. That's all."

They rode in silence for a time. Piggott had nothing to say. At length Lance blurted, "You were deuced stubborn



about something, I'll tell you that."

"What was it?"

"Whatever it was," said Lance straightly, "it wasn't worth your walking out when I needed you."

"You can't remember, lad, can you?"

"If I can't, it's because it doesn't matter. Didn't matter."

"I remember. You had it I'd betrayed ye, made a gold sovereign to find your lodgings for yon trollop o' Miss Chudleigh's."

"Oh. Oh yes." A long wait, while Piggott, lying face-down in the saddle, coughed, and coughed, and coughed. When he sat up again, shoulders limp, Lance said, "*Someone* told her."

"Ay."

"It wasn't you, then."

"Told ye so that night."

"But dash it, I—"

"Na, Lanky, say no more about it," growled the old man. "I'm not 'ere to make ye sorry or 'umble; ye're not, and ye wouldn't be; that's just you, eh? As to the rights and wrongs o' that special argyment, we could 'ave at the truth 'till we broke it free, and us all tired and blue i' the face, and we'd only find that the argyment 'ad nothin' to do with what 'appened. What I mean, if it 'adn't been the Axelrood matter, it'd 'a been somethin' else. Your time 'ad come, as I always knew it would—your big step up, though I'll admit I was slow to see it, thinkin' all along that it'd be a Courtenay matter, and not some little hanky-panky wi' Lib Chudleigh an' 'er affairs. Any'ow—you 'ad to reach a time when any Piggott was too much Piggott, an' that was it. Thinkin' I'd betrayed ye was a reason, but you'd no need of a reason."

"I'll not listen to this!" Lance shouted. "Why would I ever want to do that? Who fed me and clothed me from the cradle up; who led me to apprenticeship in the law; who was my coachman and confidant and helpmate from the time I was born until that night in Holcomb—who but you?"

"An' there ye give all the reasons why you'd 'ad enough. Ye've a sniggling suspicion in ye that part o' your blood stinks o' Bermondsey or worse, and when ye saw ye might move upward an' away, ye wanted nothing about ye

to remind ye of it. And who but the old fool who'd done those things you've listed could remind ye more?"

"You've no right to speak to me that way!"

"I've a dead man's right," said Piggott hollowly.

"Will you stop saying that? Are you trying to sound like Mr. Barrowbridge?"

"I know nothin' of Barrowbridge. 'E disappeared out o' Bermondsey years ago. As to my bein' a dead man, 'tis true enough, Lanky. Na—I don't want your sympathy and 'tisn't that I've come 'ere for. I know the signs; my ruddy lungs are gone and I shan't last the bleedin' winter."

"Well then, what *have* you come for?" Lance had had very nearly enough of this disturbing conversation, and his tone showed it.

"Let me ask you first: where do ye stand just now on the matter of the Courtenay title?"

"What business is it of—" and Lance's voice was cut off by the old man's hoarse cry. It was a wordless statement of impatience, frustration, physical and emotional anguish, ending in a series of weak coughs, all that the emptied lungs could yield up. For an appalling time then there was no inhalation at all; it came at last cautiously, a meticulous attempt to ward off paroxysm. Lance was badly frightened by it; it was an unnerving thing to stand so close to the dying.

When Piggott could speak again, it was in a hoarse whisper. "Ye whelp! Ye'll bandy words and stand on your dignity and excuse and delude yersel' while I rot before your ruddy eyes. I've not time nor patience to gambol wi' ye; I've that to tell ye which can mean your bloody fortune; ye can 'ear me out or ye can leave me now and go back to your muckin' little shed i' the wilderness." The man was outraged and yes, certainly dying; old, hurt, fevered, finished.

"Fortune?" asked Lance.

They plodded through the fitful moon-shadows for a time while Piggott went through his careful series of shallow inhalations, persuading his lungs to bear with him just a little longer. "God help me," he gasped, "but I don't care to finish what I've started."

Another long pause. It had grown colder, and their

breath streamed like scarves back over their shoulders. Lance waited while Piggott struggled over something unseen. "Na then," he said, more like his old self, "wi' ye answer me?"

"Of course," said Lance gently.

"About the Courtenay matter then: how d'ye fare?"

"I've never lost sight of it," said Lance. "Yet it's not a simple thing, nor overly hopeful. I'd stand a better chance were I quietly and decently renowned for something; connected well and publicly respected. Also I must wait on the death of Sir Ffoulkes Courtenay. A harmless old gossip he is, but overly fond of genealogy. He can't last much longer. In short—I progress, but slowly."

"And it remains a 'ope, an' only that. Good then; for did that seem a greater thing for ye than anything else, I might be silent now. Na then, 'earken: I'm just from Ickworth, in Suffolk, and bear ye the tidings of the death of the Earl."

"What's that to me? ... That'd be Bristol. No! I say!" Lance ejaculated, as his brains stopped feeling and began functioning. "George William Hervey, eh? Which at long last gives Augustus John, Sir Cuckold, the title Elizabeth Chudleigh married him for! Earl of Bristol! Well, that's one she missed; and much good it does *him*, to boot."

"Ah wouldn't speak so of your da," said Piggott.

The moments of uncertainty in a human life are uncountable as the stars. Each moment of decision is a flicker with uncertainties, for consciousness itself is only the ability to choose between reactions under a stimulus, and that instant before the instant of choice is the very color of uncertainty, be the choice wife or wine, war, wig or wimple. The moments of utter and unalloyed certainty are correspondingly rare: they are unforgettable, epochal, catastrophic, for they strike the consciousness with a bolt of substance disparate from life, energetic and unfamiliar. It was such a moment that Lance now experienced; he knew, without knowing how he knew, that of all things in time he needed not, he need not ask Piggott what it was he had just said.

Peel by silken peel, he took down fact upon fact which lay about this thundering statement, separating it like a young spring onion. And at long long last he spoke without

conscious direction of his words, barely to be heard above the soft clump of the pacing horses and the whispering of the casual breeze through frozen hedgerows: "I," he breathed, "am a dirty son of a bitch."

"Ah, never that, lad! Ye've never been dirty!"

Lance began to laugh. He laughed till he hurt, he laughed till he cried, he laughed until, literally, he could not sit his horse and he must slide off and hang to the saddle-pouches, gasping. And in time it appeared he was weeping; he himself could not have said just what this retching, wrenching, wailing thing was when it wearied and left him.

He, son and once lawful heir of Augustus John Hervey, just now turned Earl of Bristol ...

He, child of Elizabeth Chudleigh and her mad, hidden, poisonous marriage to a foolish boy ...

He, barrister's boy, trapped into manipulating that marriage into a nullity, and himself into the very bastardy he had carried like a curse for all the years it did not exist ...

He, mountebank and impersonator, searching for a title by chicanery when he was born to one ...

He, who must, in filling in the details in this structure, learn more about himself, and who could not know how to prepare himself for any more such quakes, and yet who must, who must ...

"How long have you known?"

"All your life."

"I think ... you'd ... you'd better tell me all of it," said Lance faintly. He climbed back to the saddle, Piggott riding forward to assist, then falling back to cough.

"There's little to tell, 'Twas in '43 I saw her first, at the Venetian ambassador's ball. Masquerade it was, great costly beast of an affair. I was footman at the time to milord Bath. 'E's a sticky old gout-gait today, but 'e was a boundin' billy of a youngster then, full o' the devil and a 'appy thing to come to any gathering. I used to make 'im laugh; we 'ad a jolly sort o' friendship, me keeping to my place o'course, but jolly for a' that. Anyway, me an' the rest of the foot- an' coachmen were loungin' about in the back kitchens, soppin' up 'fores an' afters—you know, things the lords an' lidy's 'adn't wanted and things they'd never see—when right in

the middle o' us all up pops the young Earl o' Bath: 'Piggott,' 'e says, 'I've no right to do such a thing but upon my soul I'd never forgive myself did I not let you see this,' and off 'e 'auls me to the edge o' the servin' doors where I might see out; and a good thing 'e did it then, for five seconds later it were four deep wi' every servant and staff in half o' London, groom's boy to upstairs maid.

"The ballroom was grand as you please, a-crawl wi' the 'ighest nobility of England and 'er allies; where I was behind George 'imself, that's 'is present mad majesty's grandfather; 'e was on a great chair, on a dais, no farther from me than yon poplar tree. And the young Earl, 'e gives me a great nudge in the ribs and a wink, an' points wiv 'is thumb, and slips out into that pretty crowd. They was dressed like milkmaids an' 'eathen warriors an' statuary and all whatnot; but nobody was ever dressed like what I saw when I looked where 'e pointed. 'Gadzooks!' I cried right out, 'but 'ere's a saucy bawd!'—eh, I couldn't 'elp myself, and I'll take my oath the King heard me, but 'e paid it no mind prolly thinkin' me only a bishop or some such 'angin about be'ind 'im.

"For there makin' 'er entrance was our Miss Chudleigh, bold as all innocence; and where all the mighty there was dressed up in their finest fantasy, she was dressed down in her barest fact. She 'ad on a sweepin' great skirt that 'id as much as a gust o' wind on a fine day; around 'er waist a bitty garland of flowers; and all the rest of 'er was dressed in white skin an' pretty hair.

"There was a thunderin' plague-struck great hush while those who could take their eyes off 'er looked to the King to see what 'e'd make of it. 'E was getting old then but 'e rose to the occasion. Up 'e got and stood for her as I think 'e wouldn't do for a churchman, and began clappin' 'is hands. So everyone else did, an' I did too, an' it was while she was comin' down the long lane the nobility opened for 'er that the word buzzed back be'ind me and the 'elp come crowdin' fit to squirt me into 'igh society like a ruddy apple seed. I stopped applaudin' and 'ung on to the door-frame with both 'ands and a leg, and watched 'er come to the dais and sink down in as pretty a' dyin'-swan deep curtsy as you'd want to see. The King asks 'er what she represents; I might've told

him clear enough, but she said somethin' of 'er own: 'Iphigenia, your Majesty,' she says from the floor, and to this day, I 'aven't found out what one of those is, but I'd like a pair of 'em for pets. Any'ow, down steps 'is Majesty and raises 'er up and 'ands 'er 'is great gold gobbet of a watch, and the ball goes on.

"Betimes I'm back i' th' scullery tryin' to press back my bulgin' eyeballs, all of two hours away and still full of Iphigenia, when up pops my young lord Bath again. 'Piggott' 'e says, 'do you slip around to the west doorway and up on the covered carriage wi' th' black pair you'll see there. I'll be out wi' a passenger for ye; if we don't slip 'er out quiet-like, every blood in London will be upon 'er like pack-dogs. Take 'er where she wants to go, an' Piggott,' 'e says, 'mind your manners or ye'll answer to me.'

"I did as bid, and I'm no sooner up on this fine black trap when out 'e comes with 'er, wrapped up in a gentleman's cloak, and pops 'er in, and off I go like a scraped-bottom sloop in a full gale. 'Where to, milady?' says I, and, 'Oh,' she sings, 'anywhere, anywhere, and drive faster.'

"So out we go and up to 'Ampstead—ay, clear up there, and she shouts to me to drive out on the 'Eath, and once out there she must stop and leap out o' th' carriage and run about i' the moonlight, leavin' the cloak, and me treated to the sight a second time, Piggott alone granted what all the 'ighborn 'ad to share.

"She were 'alf mad wi' excitement, what with 'er mad costume an' the King's watch an' all the dukes and earls snufflin' at 'er like pigs at whey; then she'd been snatched away at the very peak o' things and it left 'er drunk in a drunker way than every brandy smote a body. 'Coachman!' she cries to me, 'coachman, dance wi' me!' an' 'olds out 'er arms i' th' moonlight, an' I did, I did. It were cold out there on the dewy down, but 'er flesh were 'ot an' dry and she 'ad sparks in 'er eyes. An' when I touched 'er first I thought she'd faint, for she trembled all over and fell against me an' 'er eyes rolled up like a dead man's for a moment. Eh! but I danced wi' 'er ... mad, it were. And wi' th' last grain o' sense left to me I recalled what milord 'ad said about my manners, an' scooped 'er up and flung 'er back into the

carriage and hurried back to cobbled streets again. Betimes she thumped an' I peeked down at 'er and she was swathed to the nose in the cloak again.

"'Coachman,' she says, 'what's your name?' an' I told her; 'Piggott,' she says, 'you've been good to me, better than I wanted ye to be, an' I must reward ye. What would ye most like from me?'

"Now I must tell ye, lad, that she 'ad a bold an' jokin' way about 'er, that you knew she could 'ave a jollity and take one too. And before I knew what I was sayin' I blurted out, 'To 'ave a child of yours to call me father'; then I 'urries to say that failin' that I'd take 'er promise that she'd never tell a soul about this madness just now on the 'Eath, lest we both find ourselves wi' a shirtful of bees. 'Piggott,' says she, 'ye shall get your wish.'

"I thought she meant my second wish, but 'twas the first she granted, not six months later, and there ye were, Lanky my bucko, in the arms of the most surprised footman that ever drew breath or got a three-minute visit at midnight from a veiled lady wi' a package.

"Ay, she was something to see in the old days ..."

The old days faded, and the old voice faded, and the moon faded away behind a cloud.

"She was married then?"

"Ay, that she was, and all a deep secret. She 'adn't a farthin', and Augustus Hervey had nothin' but 'opes an' a pretty baby face. 'E was four years 'er junior, y'know. After the ball young Bath pulled the right ropes and she found 'erself Maid of Honour in th' ruddy retinue of Augusta, Princess of Wales. She 'ad to keep 'er marriage secret to keep 'er job. As for the babe—well!"

"But—just to give it away to a footman who made a joke ..."

"That was 'er way. And she didn't want ye or need ye. She ... didn't forget ye, though. 'Twas 'er had me put you in wi' Barrowbridge. I couldn't say why. I think she 'ad a run-in once wi' him. Might be she thought any child o' hers would cut 'im down. Might be she thought to use you against 'im one day. 'E never knew it, I can tell you that."

"You mean she saw you again, talked to you?"

"Never. 'Twas a foreign-lookin' chap came 'round wi'

the message. I could do as she said or not, an' if not I 'ad a hint I'd be thumped about accidental by four or five of this chap's friends. She 'ad no need to threaten, but she did."

"God," said Lance.

"She uses everything she touches," said Piggott. "If she doesn't, she shall. Why, back in those early days, when she was keepin' 'er marriage so secret an' the secret leaked out, she used e'en that. She got rid o' Hamilton by whisperin' it to him; 'e went abroad. She turned Bath into the surly knave 'e is today the same way. I don't doubt she knew everything about you, Lanky, the Courtenay matter an' all. I wouldn't doubt some o' Barrowbridge's clients weren't clients at all. Eh? So you see Miss Axelrood needn't've bribed anyone to find the Dirty Beast an' you."

"Piggott, have you any letters, papers, certificates—anything like that?"

"Na, lad. She's too sly for that. But the new Earl might have some such. 'Twouldn't matter, could ye get him to accept ye, though; he's by no means a mighty man but 'e's respected. 'E was commander-in-chief of the Mediterranean Fleet, y'know, an' a vice-admiral o' th' blue. Been M.P. out o' Bury St. Albans for donkey's years; writes a bit, they say, for the periodicals, an' got 'isself genteely notorious, y'might say, for spittin' in the eye of Rockin'am. I mean to say, 'e's not the downy-cheeked silly-ass, 'e once was, by a long shot. 'E's added to 'is own pittance, and now 'e's got the rest, all 'is brother 'ad, an' Ickworth, that's belonged to Herveys since the ruddy fifteenth century. There's a certain seat for St. Albans in Parliament for the Herveys o' that line ... all that's a 'earty 'eight to jump from, eh? were you to be next in line. Otherwise it all goes to 'is other brother Frederick, 'im that's a bishop in Ireland, an' 'e don't *need* it; 'e 'as packets."

"Piggott, hush up a bit or you'll start coughing again. I know my peers and peerage. I've got to think."

"As you wish, laddy-buck. ... Anyway, you carry your certificate about wi' ye. The Herveys is a breed apart. John Hervey it was tied 'is father to a bear an' was hanged for somethin' else. Frederick, they say, may be a bishop but's godless as well. That great old swine Dr. Johnson that everyone's kissin' the 'ams of, 'e once said, 'Call a dog



Hervey an' I will love him.' And a great strange thing about 'undreds o' years o' Herveys, two out o' three marries an Elizabeth, even if she's married 'erself at the time. But one thing about 'em all, they *looks* like Herveys, their accidents spring up throughout the ruddy population like corn lost in a field o' daisies. You 'ave the stamp, lad, you may take my word. I'll say the Hervey is blurred a bit by the Chudleigh, an' given a choice, a stranger might say you were more Chudleigh than Hervey; but give 'im a chance to say you're both, and 'e'll agree you could be nothin' else."

"Will you shut up?"

"Ay, lad. ... I know Lib Chudleigh got herself some sly kind of divorcement but surely that can't alter your fortunes; seed is seed. Ah now, she's got 'erself top o' the 'eap, eh? Since the Duke died. Now there's a fortune could drop three Ickworths into the ruddy Channel and never miss 'em. ... But 'oo knows, tides an' changes in humans bein' what they are; for you to link the Kingston properties wi' th' Bristol ain't so ruddy farfetched as the idea of snaffling off a dead Devonshire title. I mind—"

"Now you listen to me," snapped Lance as they rounded the bend of the brook and approached his footbridge, "I want no more chuntering and maundering out of you. I'm sick of listening to it. Do you tell me one thing and one thing only; why didn't you tell me all this years ago?"

"Coo. You don't 'ave to ask me such a question. And you don't 'ave to jump salty at me neither."

"Never mind that. I'm asking you."

"I *am* telling it to you, Lanky, the very instant it can do you a pennyworth o' good."

"Who in hell are you to decide what's good and what's not good for me? How do you know what I might have done years back, knowing this? or what Barrowbridge might have done? *Why didn't you tell me?*"

Angry in his turn, Piggott wheezed, "Because, damn ye, if I've to spell it out: ye don't—unless you must—ye don't tell a child, nor tell a man, that 'is mother's a hoor!"

"You tell this child!" screamed Lance, smashing himself on the chest. He was so angry he drooled. "God damn you for an interfering old pig! What did you keep me around you for all those years—to dream you were the father of one

of your betters? Did that make you feel like part of a gentleman instead of altogether a Bermondsey fen rat? How do you excuse yourself for putting me out to slavery with Barrowbridge when all the while I might have been at Harrow or abroad with a tutor, learning to speak like a gentleman from gentlemen instead of from some strumous old swine in the second storey of a filthy warren ... ay, and sweeping, by God, by *God!*” he shouted, “and chamber pots! Ay, Lanky, slide me yon chamber, then get thee out to Surrey to some foreclosed manor land and have a threadbare poacher teach you to shoot grouse like a gentleman so you’ll know how an M.P. does it on the twelfth of August ... and all the while it might’ve been falconry for me, and fencing. Oh Jesus, Jesus, Jesus, Piggott, you’d’ve served me better had you sold me to the Tripolitanians as a bloody slave! What for? What for? Have you a slice of my mother’s humor; d’ye like to see a body squirm and suffer while you alone know how far he has fallen, and you with a heel in his face? Why? Why? Did ye dream I’d one day be the master of great estates and fit you with a diamond collar and old brandy for the rest of your days?”

“Ah, lad ... no, no ... say no more. I raised ye for yersel’, because I loved ye, and I could not tell ye that your mother—”

“She’s my mother, let me be the judge of that!” roared Lance. “What of my mother? Where is my mother today, and where am I? And for this I’m to buy a pasture and turn you out in it in your old age—for this knightly favor? Old man, I’d not give you a cup of water, not, by God, unless you were drowning.”

“Ah,” the old man breathed. He shook his head blindly, fumbled at his eyes with his hands. “I feared to do it, I feared this. ... Well then, Lanky, farewell, and God be with thee.”

“And the devil with you!” and he heeled his horse and bounded over the bridge. He never looked back.

All night long they sat before the fire, Lance Captain Courtenay, petty squire; Lancaster Higger-Piggott, coachman’s brat; Lainston Hervey of Ickworth, aye, Bury St.

Albans and the houses of Parliament; Chudleigh-Hervey, libertine, sweeping up and down the Continent in the grand manner, sampling sins. There they sat, one, the other, two of them, three, the lowly worshiping the highborn and the highest utterly despising the rest. Back and back, round and back again he went, they went, circling and changing one with the others in a weary, angry de Coverly ... then for a moment there would be a young man alone in a draughty hall, up for a bit of firewood to hurl into the flames. At times he would glare furiously upward to a gimlet-hole high in the wall; he would not go up there, not now.

He plotted and planned and discarded and planned again, until fatigue sucked away a part of his sanity and he began to have visions, visions of the hunt, the masquerade, the pageantry of court ... a vision of visions, his mother, young, clad in a transparent web, prostrating herself at his feet in a dying-swan curtsy, and he confronting her with his full knowledge of her machinations, her huge laughter at the lad she had caused to bastardize himself. *You laughed eh, milady? Then laugh now! I'll have you sweeping for me, Mother, slide me yon chamber! Miss Axelrood, do you hand me yon wee box of stinking salve, that I may salute my dear mother.* A great square man in admiral's court regalia: and the kneeling figure moans: *Augustus! Augustus, forgive me: Take all I have!* and the admiral: *My son, my long lost son, Take mine, take hers, take all.*

Lance shook himself awake—or not awake, for the fugue had not been sleep. He drew all the shades and shapes and colored lights of his fantasies down to a hard bright white point of fury, and, *Duchess*, he said with all his heart and mind, *you will pay me for this.*

At that point he was inspired. First, he thought rapidly, Lainston, and the parish record, truly entered so that none can say it is not the clear genuine record of the marriage of Augustus John Hervey to Elizabeth Chudleigh. Thence to the one higher body than the ecclesiastical court, and its piddling jactitation of marriage: to Parliament with the parish record. Then what? Ah, then the Hervey marriage must still exist, and he, Lance, is legitimate again; ay, and Elizabeth Chudleigh is a bigamist! (But the Duke is dead!) no matter, no matter; the law concerned itself with the first

husband, and he lived, he lived—it was bigamy, just for the act of marriage to the Duke of Kingston. (But she is not in England: may never be.) Then Parliament marks her as a fugitive, tries her *in absentia*, and since her second marriage is now the nullity, she is no longer a duchess; her properties fall to the Crown. (But that's not the place for such properties, out of reach.) Then how ...

Inspired, inspired!

In the public interest, anyone might bring this suit. But there was a man who had a special interest—a man who stood to inherit the Kingston properties, though not the title not being *de corpore suo* ... Evelyn Meadows, who ate out of his hand—he would bring the suit! He had the right, even the duty.

Lance leaned back and rubbed his hands together rapidly, a distinctive Barrowbridge gesture.

Now then. What of the Bristol matter—what of his father, Augustus John Hervey, the new Earl?

He, Lance, had forced Augustus Hervey into collusion and perjury in the jactitation action. Could these not be used against him?

... But no; he did not know of Lance, could not know he was involved in the matter. The bigamy trial would make a laughingstock of this third Earl of Bristol; if he never found out that Lance had anything to do with either case, he could not blame him; if in his disgrace from collusion and cuckoldry, perjury and persiflage, his young son appeared out of limbo to be at his side, to honor and comfort him, to give his declining years the son he had never had ... yes, and he with the Hervey stamp on his features and the Chudleigh certification to blur it, as the old man had said—why, he couldn't fail!

And Chudleigh, old, disgraced at last, duchess no longer, countess never, would sink away into the mire with her transparent costume as a winding-sheet; and young Meadows would have the Kingston treasures, and could only be grateful ...

And he would marry Elaine, eldest daughter and heir of Sir Gregory Eustace, and in time add her fortune to the Bristol estates ...

... And if he wanted something to do with his busy

clever mind thereafter, why not pursue the Courtenay earldom as well?

He laughed and clapped his hands together, rose and teetered happily on his toes at the window.

It was snowing now, restfully, quietly, all's well with the world. Patterns of rime flaked the window-light, to show how cold it had become. The first dawn greyed the east and turned the hedgerows into steel-graved glyphs on the snow.

Cold ... "*God!*" he cried, coming to his senses, "Piggott!"

He flung on his heavy things and banged out of the house, round to the stables. He saddled, mounted, his hands, his mind a blur of eagerness and content with life. He galloped round the bowling green and over the footbridge, stopped a moment at the path.

He wouldn't have gone up—there's only Minden. He'll have gone down, to the Tatsfield road.

He spurred his horse. His blood sang in the cold air. His fatigue was gone with his hatred; he was alive and certain.

And he hadn't far to go. Piggott's horse stood athwart the path, tethered to a poplar, stamping and rheumy with cold and inaction. Nearby, his back against the heavy hedge, sat Piggott. He was not lolling nor lying, nor hunched, as a man might be when afraid. He sat with his feet apart and his hands on his knees, calmly waiting. His face was neither sad nor angry, nor was it content; it too was merely waiting, the face of a man of patience who knows not how long it may be before he is met. He was looking directly at Lance, and he was stone-dead.

Lance slipped off his horse and fell to his knees. "Piggott!" he cried in a great voice, and it echoed and echoed away over the Downs.

"Ah, God help me, what have I done?" he moaned, and, "Look, God, look what I've done: I've gone and killed my best witness."

## 12.

"IT'S LIKE BEING BORN again, sir!"

"Well, you've been gestating long enough in the womb of London town," said Barrowbridge. He was feebler now, and hard to hear when one wasn't used to him; but then, one was. The old mind, however, was crisp and clear, though subject to surprisingly sudden fits of slumber, sometimes only a minute or two long. He had no longer any particular sleep period, but read and slept, slept and thought, talked and slept as it came to him. "Sit you down and tell me all you've done, lad ... my, you look as if you'd paid sixpence for a ruby and found it to be a diamond."

" 'Twas threepence, sir, and the diamond big as your head," said Lance exultantly. "Well, I've been to see our old friend Meadows." He laughed.

"Tried to scalp ye, I'll warrant."

"Ah no, he's over that. He's living in two rooms over a tannery in Camden Town and searching for the meaning of things."

"On what road?"

"He says all the universe and all the years are but a hand's breadth away from us, and do you care to see all of it at a glance, you need only open the casement." He laughed. "To open this window, you place yourself in a small room with dark hangings and no air, light a brazier, throw on some dried leaves and lie down before it until you are half-dead with the smoke from it, and in this condition all knowledge is at your disposal. He finds it impossible to recall what the knowledge is after he comes out of it, but he's sure he recognizes it at the time and goes back and back after it. He forgets to eat—perhaps he means not to; he did say that eating and sweating and such intrude upon the higher self—and he never goes out but to fetch more leaves from the lascars down at the docks. *Ganja*, they call it, 'wisdom weed.' It smells like old rope and catnip.

"I thought I'd find him too stupefied to do anything with, thinking of opium and such, but he surprised me. His

thinking is wild as ever, but perfectly clear—perhaps more so, as I discovered when I got him decently dressed and over to a private room at the Fish and Staff and packed him full of good English mutton and ale, which he ate submissively enough but uncaring. A strange thing, his body starving and his mind not knowing it.

“I explained to him that it was in his power to right the wrongs done him, his cousin Charles, and his dead uncle Evelyn Pierrepont, the Duke of Kingston. I don’t know that righting wrongs, even wrongs done to him, is a subject of interest to the lad, but the pacification of his tormentors definitely is, and I think the idea of gaining the approval of his disgusted cousin Charles pleases him very much. Riches for himself, vengeance against that—that very blight of a woman—these seem not to reach him, but when I painted him a picture of Charles wringing his hand and saying ‘Well done!’ why, he wept onto his mutton chops. And when I explained to him that the action I had in mind would require nothing from him but his signature upon various papers and that he probably would not need to testify or appear—for the entire case rests on documentary evidence—why, he was overjoyed.”

“And did he not question you as to your interest in the affair?”

“Not he. I do believe he lives in a world populated by but three classes of people: those who do things to him, those who do things for him, and those who leave him alone. The last are the ones he likes the most, and his greatest wish is to include all humankind in it. Any action which adds the class of persecutors to it is an action he favors. As to the few who do things *for* him, he feels humble and unworthy and grateful. If he thinks about my motives at all, it is only to regard me as a mystifyingly clever chap who goes about righting wrongs out of the greatness of his heart, using methods he would not presume to understand.” He laughed.

“Mind you never begin to see yourself in that light,” Barrowbridge cautioned. “And so he agreed, eh?”

“That he did, and then and there signed identifications of self and total charges, and I carried him back to his catnip temple. I then did all necessary things at the Court

and the Office of the Clerk, Lord's. The suit is begun, even now a rider is off to Lainston to take in charge the parish record for 1744, and a package is being made of the Duke's marriage records, the proceedings at the suit for jactitation, and everything else relevant. Including, of course, a despatch of information to the Duchess and a command to return, which she won't do."

"Have you yourself signed anything?"

"Not a dot. I've a faceless little chap called Briggs, just barely a member of the bar, to send my messengers about. He'll voice everything on behalf of Evelyn Meadows."

"Ay, that was wise. The new Earl of Bristol isn't going to be happy about this, testifying before the House of Lords—to which he's only now had entry—that after those years of being cuckolded he did collude and perjure to remove the nuisance. Should you be identified with such a humiliation, you'll be hard put to it to sidle up to him and say, 'Love me, Da.' "

"He'll not find out. How could he?"

"Just you take care. ... And so the case is to come up?"

"It couldn't be stopped now. Her Grace Elizabeth, Duchess of Kingston shall be summoned to stand trial for bigamy, will certainly refuse, will be tried *in absentia* and certainly found guilty."

"Lad, don't make a habit of using the word 'certainly.' But I do think you're right. And what else do you prophesy?"

"The Kingston marriage must be voided by the verdict, and her title with it. The title becomes extinct, the estate goes to the cousins Meadows, the now-valid marriage to the Earl o' Bristol succumbs to a divorce for adultery which must be brought and shall be granted—ay, and at a stroke—and at the end we have a crushed and sorry Bristol to be consoled by a dutiful son, and," he said slowly and with the greatest pleasure, "an obliterated Elizabeth Chudleigh."

"Do ye hate her so much?" Barrowbridge asked.

Lance answered with a sound, a snort, which said more about hatred and scorn than Alexander Pope could in a lifetime.

"Ay," said Barrowbridge, nodding as if to a statement. Then, "So far, lad, so good; things should indeed come as



you say. She married Bristol and you have the proof; she married Kingston; between the two there is merely a rare and perjurious action. 'Tis bigamy and no mistake, and she must be guilty. As to the Earl of Bristol, I credit ye with a fine insight. Were ye to go to him now with no proof 'o yerself but your Hervey's face and your Chudleigh schemes, he'd jettison you today as he did when you were but an unwanted proof of an unwanted circumstance. But appear, and stand by him, when he's sick with humiliation, call him father and honour him, and I do believe you can win him over. ... 'Tis a pity you haven't a speck more substance, though. Long-lost son or no, you're still a penniless claimant to a sizable estate."

"But I've thought of that!" cried Lance, his exultation returning. "What if my wife were daughter of a baronet, with a nice little holding and a bit of gold coming to her?"

"Ah—ha!" said the old man appreciatively. "I see what you're up to, ye sly scamp. You wouldn't marry Miss Eustace to elevate yourself to the level of the Gregorys, but you would to elevate the Gregorys to the level of earls!"

"Or so it will seem. But the marriage will be for love, and the elevation will be my secret until the time comes to come to the aid of yon poor broken Earl."

"You're a credit to all my wickedness," chuckled the old man. "Tell me now what I needn't ask—why did you proceed with all this before asking my thoughts?"

"Have I done any of it wrong?"

"Did I not say I needn't ask? ... Na, you're right all along, fiendishly so. Eh!" He closed his eyes for a space, in that swift sleeping of his. Lance waited patiently. With his eyes still closed, Barrowbridge said, "I suppose I was trying to make you say you needed me no longer. Now why should I want to hear that?"

"Ah, *sir!*" cried Lance, but the old man did not move again, nor speak, so he shrugged and left, smiling.

As always, he was warmly received at Minden, Bella and Barbara dancing about him and plaguing him with little attentions until shooed away by Elaine, and Sir Gregory emerging from centuries past to grant a sherry and a moment's conversation to the younger man. "And how do

you fare with the work, sir?"

Sir Gregory gave a pleased grunt. "Bit proud of it. Never done before, what? Decent history of Rome. Almost finished. Deuced lot of work. Years. Well, worth it. What?"

"I picked up something that might be a help, sir. Source, y'know. This chap's done a bit of research, I think," and he handed over the just-published quarto he had picked up in London. "Three more volumes being printed now; I've ordered them for you."

"I say, good of you. Hm, yes," said the baronet, peering at the book, turning it over, opening, leafing. "Yes indeed. Look this over, what?" and off he went into his sanctum again. Bella, the obedient one, had already towed Barbara away, and he was alone with Elaine. She smiled and came close. "You're so good to Father."

"And why not? Everyone should be."

"What was the book?"

"Oh ... something they're all chatting about in the City just now. Haven't looked at it myself, but since it concerns Rome and so on, I thought he might like it. Chap called Givens ... uh, Gibbon, yes. *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. But enough of dead things, my dear." He took her hand and they sat together on the sofa. She was in pink this evening, such a pink as should have gone badly with her red-gold (or gold-red) hair, but which was enchanting instead. She had an extraordinarily fine neck, he noticed for the first time. As she turned her face away and down, he caressed with his eyes the clean straight lines of the tendons to their hollowed junction below her throat, and the pink petal of ear so shyly hidden near the upper end. He reached out with his free hand and touched the ear. She did not move away but closed her eyes, so that the lashes lay right down on her cheek.

"I think," he said in a voice full of astonishment, "that I have never seen you before."

Not looking at him, she said, "What has happened to make you see?"

He laughed, mostly at the thought of telling her what was happening. "I've been dreaming," he said, "and I think my dreams will come true."

"Who is in your dreams?"

“Ah ... fine folk. Lands and castles and ships of gold.” He looked up through the ceiling at some heaven of his own and chuckled richly. “Brocades and masquerades and a great stable of blooded nags ...”

He was finished, and she made a little disappointed sound, but turned to him and smiled. “I’m glad the dreams please you so.

“Once upon a time,” he said suddenly, warmly, taking her other hand, “there was a young prince who was put under a spell by an ugly old witch. And it made him invisible. He walked about and did things, and went to places and saw things, and felt that he was alive; but really, you know, he wasn’t, because when anyone looked his way they saw ... nobody, just nobody.”

“Is there a princess?”

“Oh, most certainly there’s a princess. She had golden hair, and her eyes—her eyes—”

“What of her eyes?”

“A wonderful thing: they were both exactly the same color.”

“Oh ...” she said petulantly, and in mock anger, snatched away her hands; but she put them right back.

“And the prince went one day and saw that the wicked old witch had lands and treasures and castles and—all the things I was dreaming about. And so he made a great magic when the old witch wasn’t looking, and poof! she was punished and no one ever heard of her again, and so he took all her lands and castles and everyone could see him.”

“Oh,” she said.

“What’s the matter?”

“I don’t like your dream.”

“Why not? It’s a lovely one!”

“It hasn’t anything about the princess.”

“But he married the princess!”

“Did he?”

“Doesn’t that please you?”

“I expect it does, all right. ... He was greedy.”

He laughed immoderately. “Ay, that he was. And a good thing too, else he’d still be a nobody.” He looked at her and sobered. “Can’t it please you? What shall I add to it to make it please you, Elaine?”

"I'm silly," she said, and tried to laugh lightly, making instead two silly little squeaks. At that she blushed, and again he had this strange sensation of never having seen her before.

"Tell me," he begged.

"Oh-h ... I thought the princess would love him truly, and one day she would wish for a prince, and kiss her wish, and poof! there he would be, right by her where he had been all along."

A most amazing sensation came to him. It felt like shame, and if it was, he was incapable of understanding why. It certainly felt like it. He pressed it away and asked tolerantly, "How do you kiss a wish?"

"I don't know. I expect you just—"

What happened? What happened? It was a tease, a small thing, a nothing, a *passe-tiempe*, and she closing her eyes and her lips to show him some ... childish ... something ... and this blaze, this coruscation, arms full of, mouth full of, break, burst, spill, crash, silence—

Breathe.

God, he would say, but God was a word and he could not say a word. He held her and stroked the nape of her neck while she cried.

She sat up suddenly and looked at him, and he said a very strange thing. He said, "I was fourteen in the garret and a thousand times since, and never this, not once." He saw in her eyes a knowledge of what he meant, though he himself hardly knew; the knowledge he saw in her eyes was past in an instant; it seemed like the knowledge Meadows had spoken about, that he found in his draped fuming room, known utterly at the time and inexpressible thereafter.

She put her hand on his mouth, and took it away, and put her other hand to make a cup on her lap. She sat looking down into it while he rose quietly and left without a word.

All the way back to Featherfront he looked up at new stars with new eyes, and the only articulate thought he could command in all that time was, "But ... a kiss did that?"

On the eve of the trial he went to see the lawyer Briggs,

and secured copies of each indenture, affidavit, certificate and instrument pertaining to the action, and carried them all home for Barrowbridge's inspection. He was followed from London by two horsemen, which was unpleasant; once he told himself *but I'm not invisible any more* and was irritated at the thought: this was no time for whimsy; and then he began to think they were highwaymen, which made him think of Piggott, which unaccountably angered him even more. But when he turned in at the path, and climbed the first slope, he looked back and saw them canter past, going straight on toward Tatsfield, and then he laughed at himself for a fool and forgot the matter.

This was a time for happy moments; Barrowbridge gave him one after he had seen the papers. It was only a grunt and a shake of the head; he had not a word to change nor a suggestion to make; just a caution: "Do not let a whisper of your part in this get to the Earl o' Bristol, and you've not a thing to fear." Suddenly he flung the papers upward with a shadow of his old great shout, and, "Lord!" he cried, "what a structure! What a retribution! You could rack the old bitch and never hurt her so much as this! And all so safe, and all without her even daring to defend herself!" He looked at Lance with fond amaze. "I lie here sometimes and wonder what I've been spared for, Lanky, for by rights I should have died when I said I did, in Bermondsey. I'll never think that again; I've lived for this, and I'm happy."

Lance was embarrassed. "Ah ..." he said, shy as a pipit. "Meadows thinks I'm put here to make people happy, too."

The old man chuckled, then: "Ah yes—Meadows. Have you a plan for Meadows? 'Twould be a shame to waste all the Kingston estates on him."

"Oh ... I shall scan them; mayhap there'll be a town house or a bit of a manor which I might wistfully covet and he might gratefully deed me. He will have his opportunity."

"If wistful you must be, let it be for lack of a block of high rentals 'round Grosvenor."

"Mr. Barrowbridge," Lance said abruptly, "I'm in love."

"Tchah!"

"I am, sir. Truly."

"The blind archer at last ... d'ye know what Cupid confers on his victims, Lanky?"

"Madness, they say," smiled Lance.

"Blindness, Lanky. His own blindness."

"But it's Miss Eustace, sir. Don't you agree that a linkage with—"

" 'Tis not the girl I object to, nor the plan. They're both exquisite. ... A strange thing about the wonderful Jesuit, Balthazar Gracian, is that his *Oraculo* contains not a single maxim about love and courtship. In a specialist on worldly wisdom this seems a dreadful oversight, but the penetrating mind will discover that it is not. It is, indeed, the greatest part of his wisdom."

"How so?"

"Why, it is his way of saying that the wise think so little of love that they think of it not at all. If I presumed to add a maxim to the *Oraculo* on the subject, explaining this, I would say—He closed his eyes and slept, or seemed to sleep. Then he opened them and continued, "*—would say When considering marriage, look first for love, and if it is absent, proceed. The moth, in a room of a thousand lights, sleeps safe on an unlit candle.*"

Shocked, Lance cried, "Why, she's the most—" But Barrowbridge was asleep.

Lance gathered up the papers and went away.

A shepherd's crook and a bony sturgeon swung in the bright noon sun over the entrance to the Fish and Staff. And it was full of fine folk on such a fine day, eating the splendid food and drinking the good ale and old brandy. 'Tis a day of largesse, thought Lance, for the first time in his life tossing a silver sixpence to a beggar. 'Tis a day of brightness and certainty, marred only by one's inability to be a fly on the wall of the House of Lords, watching the progress of humiliation, seeing the pen strokes sending disaster away to Italy and the enemy, searching the newest Earl's face as it crumbled under the blows and was softened for the aid and comfort he would build for it as meticulously as he had designed these wounds.

He paused and looked down the street where a corner of Parliament toasted in the sun. Was it started? Was it over? Would it take all day, and adjourn, and take tomorrow, while the business of America waited, while the

disasters of Rockingham, the stubbornness of George III, the balanced forcefulness of Pitt and the balance it forced from Fox—would all these matters wait on him through today ... through the week? *Ah Parliament*, he exulted, *the next time I sway you, you'll know well it's I*. He would sit with the Prime Minister over a glass of port one day, he thought, and he would say *Remember the day back in '76, and the trial of the false Duchess of Kingston? You were there, were you, and saw it. Ha ha! Now let me tell you what really happened.*

From the direction of Parliament came a great closed coach, yellow, struck golden in the sunlight. *I shall ride in such a carriage*. He stood on the walk before the Fish and Staff and watched it come.

From his left he heard his name called. He turned. From the Fleet Street corner came a lady and a—why, it was Sir Gregory Eustace! And in a pale blue sacque, Elaine! He raised his hand, and to his amazement saw the baronet stop dead, shaking his fist. He saw Elaine turn to her father, clasp her hands anxiously, then suddenly run from him, to come tripping down the street toward Lance, holding out her arms.

From his right he heard his name called. He whirled. The great coach was almost opposite now. Its door swung wide, and its passenger held out an imperious bejeweled hand to him.

He turned again. Elaine's face was pink with exertion and something else; it was twisted as a face so fair and dear should never be. He took a step toward her, but, from across the road: "*Here!*" in as chilling, as self-confident a command as had been flung at him since the early days with Barrowbridge.

Spellbound, he stepped off the curb and crossed the road, and it was as if fear had been there all his life, not born of the moment at all; fear curled tighter in him than the spiral of a butterfly's tongue, fear now springing out and across his belly slashing him inwardly. For he knew that face. Reflexively he took the extended hand. "Milady!"

"Say 'Your Grace.' "

"Your Grace ... " he said faintly. Because he held the hand, and because one did, one must—he kissed it.

Behind him, on the walk; anguished: "Lance!"

From the coach: "Get in ... son."

He got in the coach.

The door slammed and the wheels rumbled. With the sound, the near-cataleptic numbness left him and the fear took over, drying his mouth, capturing his lips and cheeks, knotting his stomach with a great empty ache. So crouched he there, his eyes drawn down to glistening slits as through their squeezed captured tears they tried to see the magnificent menace seated opposite. Faintly, "*Lance!*" came through the window unheard, a glimpse of pale blue unseen; then the world was shrunk to these rumbling walls and the presence of terror seated so close that it touched him knee to knee.

"Well, I'll be damned," said the Duchess.

His vision cleared and at last he saw her.

He wished he could see a Hervey now, so that he could understand the admixture. But that was a detail; his mirror henceforth could tell him who his mother was.

She said, "I confess, this is a moment I've dreamed of since I was summoned, and in the dream you have crawled, you have wept, you have fled, you have fainted. I never thought to find you smiling."

He said nothing.

"Perhaps Lily was right in her preoccupation. Does it please you to learn that she would speak of you daily if I permitted it; that she has written you seven letters which I have had to intercept? ... I should listen more to Lily."

She had a strange voice. Different ... different how? Different from what one would expect. He knew her as resourceful and shrewd; he had coupled softness, mellifluousness with these. Therefore he did not expect this brassy quality. Her voice was coarse as a Bermondsey barmaid's, her diction pure as an archbishop's. It shocked, it transfixed. She said, "Are you going to persist in using one of my own best tactics, and remain silent until you can command the situation?"

He bent his head until his lips were in his puffed scarf, and tried to wet them with his tongue. It was too soon.

She observed this sharply and made a mistake. "Very well, then—smile. I shall give you the situation, exactly as it is, and defy you to command it.



"I am just come from Lords'. It is over—all over. It took under two hours. You're a fool, boy. You're the cleverest fool I think I've ever known, and there may be hope for you. And perhaps ignorance of the most important piece in this pattern does not quite qualify you as a fool; I'll give you that.

"You did not know because you could not what passed between me and Bath in the old days, between me and Hamilton, ay, and Winchester and Bishop Hervey—ha! even Bath was astonished to find out about *him*! You don't know what passed between us, and you couldn't know what was left.

"You could have known, however, how they all feel about Augie—I should say, the Earl of Bristol, your honored father. Ah, you should have found out about that first! ... Perhaps you are a fool after all.

"Know, then, that I walked into Lords' at ten of the clock this morning after quite the busiest two days of a very busy life. And whom should I see first but my dear old cockscomb Bath, surly and gout-ridden but with the old devil still alight in his eyes." She chuckled. " 'It's *in camera*, old girl,' says he, and takes my arm, 'Come along with me, and, bless you, it's *good* to see you again.'

"And in I went, to the Green chamber, comfy as ever with a bright fire cheerful on the hearth, and all my old loves ranged about the room. I tell you, boy, it was the jolliest reunion of the jolliest people on earth.

"We sat about in that cosy place for an hour or so playing 'Remember when' and confessing to each other little secrets we'd kept all these years; at our age such things lose their harshness and mellow like madeira. That was when I asked them to send for Winchester and the Bishop, and when they came in it was jolly all over again.

"And at last we came down to brass tacks. 'This stupid business of this stupid Meadows' is the way Bath referred to it." She mimicked well. " 'The fool has us to rights. Those deuced documents, y'know. We must do something about you, Lib darling, you're a ruddy menace.' "

She tapped Lance's knee with the hard tip of a forefinger. "You can push Parliament to do a thing, you see, but you can't stop them from doing it their way.

“I shall make it brief. Under no circumstances were they going to make a House performance of this matter, partly on my behalf, bless them all, and partly because they really like Augie. They were not going to force him to get up before the world and confess to his difficulties with me and his poor bumbling perjuries in the jactitation action. He wasn’t even there, and for good reason. But I’ll come to that later.

“They asked me if I intended to stay in England and I said I did not. That was splendid; I shall go abroad, and stay abroad, and it shall be called agreed exile. As to the title, since it expires with my death in any case, there is no objection to my using it until then; I deprive no one.

Again the hard finger. “As to the estates, it may be technically true that bigamy makes my second marriage a nullity. However, so airtight and ironbound is that magnificent will that you, dear boy, helped draw up, that the estates are mine because I’m me, and not merely because I am the Duchess of Kingston. This adds weight to my keeping the title; for I have the estates.

“The only thing which remains to be settled is the matter of my properties here in England, which, in my tragic exile, will be useless to me. I am therefore giving them all to my dear Lily Axelrood, who has, after all, been a devoted helper and assistant to me and deserves a change and a reward. Incomes sufficient for their upkeep, and a bit over, go with them; the rest of the money will, of course, come to me.

“You wouldn’t believe how quickly these things were settled there in the Green chamber. Ah well, Bath had them all drawn up, knowing everything and knowing me to boot; all I had to do was nod my head and laugh with him.

“And at the last he told me, as a sort of afterthought, ‘By the way, old girl,’ says he, ‘we shall have to punish you for this bigamy thing. Says so right here in the law. Brand your pretty hand.’ And with that he takes a horrid spitting mull-iron out of the fire and brandishes it about, dropping sparks on the carpet. He glares at me with those devil’s eyes alight, and plunges the iron straight down into a mug of ale he has ready.

‘Lib,’ says he, ‘it’s neither the season nor the time of

day for mulled ale, but do you take a swig o' this while it's hot, and drink our health, and let us certify you branded.' So I did, and I kissed them all, and promised them to clear out of England as soon as I'd had my affairs taken care of, and they all wept a bit, and that was that.

"I'm satisfied."

"Are you, boy?"

The coach rumbled on over the cobbles, while Lance sat passive, her words resting on his mind like snow on a cold kiln, waiting to melt down. At length some of his preoccupation left him and vision returned and he found himself looking at his hands a-jiggle on one knee, and he realized that he had been staring at them for a long time. He raised his eyes to his fellow-passenger's face, the first half of that quick flash of inspection one flicks at a stranger, hoping it will be unobserved, knowing that if one meets the stranger's eyes, one will look away and fumble something.

He met her eyes, and there his glance was arrested. In that moment he met one of the most compelling qualities of this woman. In his way Barrowbridge had described it, and so had Piggott. He found that he could look straight at her, for as long as he liked, taking whatever he could. She did not hypnotically capture his attention, snakelike. She did not present that detachedness which sometimes makes it possible to inspect a new face and not be touched by it. She gazed back with neither warning nor welcome, but with perfect frankness: here I am, all of me; here is fire, here freeze; walk where you choose and take the consequences.

She smiled a little and said, "Would you care to leave me now?"

"Yes," he said.

She nodded. "That is the first word in converse you have ever spoken to me, and one to remember. I shall expect you to use it again." She made a disenchanting change in the smile and vanished it, and said, "You may not leave me now; I have one other matter to discuss.

"I have been in England for three days, but even before I arrived I knew you for what you are and I knew what you had done. Do not be mystified. You might have reasoned it for yourself. A charge of bigamy smacks of proof, and proof could only be the Lainston parish record, and that smacks of

Barrowbridge, and lo! I meet you again. I had your half-mask of an unknown lawyer Briggs located and bribed even before I set foot ashore, and thereafter it was not difficult to divine the balance of your plan. The bastard who was not a bastard by birth, who became a bastard by his own machination, could only want to legitimize himself, and there was only one way to do that, and that was to legitimize his parents' marriage. I do not hold against you the fact that of several ways to do this, you chose the most vindictive; in your position I should have done the same or worse. In my position, however, I could not tolerate it; anyone who has ever caused me discomfort must pay threefold, except for you, my boy, who caused me discomfort by the very act of being born, and who continues to cause me discomfort by drawing breath. So you pay tenfold.

"Recognizing that your only aim in this matter could be the Bristol heritage, I took the trouble to go to Ickworth in East Anglia and visit my ... let us say, your father; that relationship is somewhat less diffuse. Augie has become a very distinguished gentleman, and like many weak men, has a streak of angry stubbornness when properly aroused. Seeing him was not easy; he would not admit me and so I had to go round the house and march in through the terrace windows and confront him, and then it was some minutes before he understood that while he was saying I should not be there and that he wanted no intercourse of any kind with me, my relatives or my retinue, I was warmly agreeing with him.

"When I could, then, I informed him briefly but completely about you, who you are, who you claim you are; your vital part in the suit for jactitation of marriage by which, in freeing himself of me, he so jeopardized his good name, and your present action. I also predicted in detail your only reasonable move after this was over—to appear before him as a long-lost son, with his face and my scheming persuasiveness, and so manipulate him that he would pay for his humiliations by awarding you his estate and title."

She laughed gently. "It was intriguing to see just how furious Augie Hervey, the third Earl of Bristol, could

become. I was sure for a moment he would fling himself down upon the carpet and scream. When I left him he was hard at work on a letter to his barristers, arranging for a categorical disinheritance of putative and potential heirs *de corpore suo* known, unknown, or to be known in future, together with a complete alienation of his title from his property, so that in the unlikely event that you should so convincingly prove your identity that you succeed to the title, it will carry with it not one penny. Only a petty man can be quite that meticulous; only an angry man could carry the thing quite that far. Your father is a petty, angry man.

"Disappointed, dear?"

He turned his head slowly and stared unseeing out of the window. Her words still mounted on his mind, which was shocked beyond absorption; they would stay there until it was too weary to keep them out, and they would come plunging in. Deep down he knew this and it terrified him.

Abruptly the carriage stopped. He turned to her again, startled, and found her gazing interestedly at him, her magnetic head a bit on one side, her eyes excessively bright.

"I think you are wise to be so silent. You've given me no words I can ever use against you. I feel I could have you talking like a jackdaw if I put my mind to it, but I choose not. I do not like you and cannot. I confess however that I admire your shrewdness and your ingenuity, and I'm all agog—really—to find out what you will do now. I hope it shall surprise me. Whatever it is, you may be quite sure that I shall know immediately what you've done. Think of me with you always, like a bright-eyed bird on your shoulder, knowing all the details of all you do." She made a quick gesture so fraught with command that he obeyed thoughtlessly and opened the door.

"Even," she continued, "to the location of the particular public stables where you have left your horse."

He swung his head dully and looked and saw that she was right. He put one foot upon the step, and felt her tug his sleeve. "Do get yourself baptized," she said warmly. "It will save your soul, if you have one, and it will give me a name to call you by; you haven't one now, you know, for all your legitimacy." He surged up, but she caught him again. "I think you shall not see me again," she said very gently.

*Now say good-by. Good-by Mother, perhaps, or, you filthy sow. But say good-by. It will make a difference.* But he could not know what difference it would make, exactly, nor if it would be a difference he would want.

He leapt out and crossed the walk and went briskly into the stable. He heard the coach rumble away while he was asking for his horse. He doled out his syllables, being careful to miss none for all his divided attention. He waited with his back to the doorway until his animal was brought, then mounted and wheeled and rode out toward Westminster Bridge.

If he had any thoughts between London and the Downs, he could never thereafter recall them.

## 13.

HE RODE INTO THE stable yard at Featherfront and slid off his horse. For a moment he leaned against it, his forehead against the damp warm withers, wondering. It seemed to come to him only then just where he was, what had happened. His knees buckled under the weight and shock of it.

He shook himself like a spaniel and set his jaw, pressed himself away from the horse and ran into the house by the back, through the kitchen. Faithful old Johnson, grizzled now and broader than ever, ran to him full of mute's signals and semaphores, her heavy face urgent and anxious, but he thrust her aside and bounded up the covered stair. *If he's sleeping by God I'll twitch him out onto the floor.*

But the old man's eyes were open and pensive, one eyebrow cocked in that comforting what's-this-I-can-handle-it expression, and Lance almost cried out with relief.

"She's back, sir, the Duchess, and it's all smashed. She's been to Ickworth to see Bristol and she's got away with the Kingston title and property, and none of it worked—none of it, not even Meadows' *God-damned inheritance!*" He stopped and stood gasping and demanding.

Barrowbridge lay silent, not looking at Lance, but still at the door, with that quizzical eyebrow and the bright, bright eyes.

"Damn it, there's nothing left! We—we are ...

"Mr. Barrowbridge?" he asked softly.

"Sir?" he whispered, bending close.

Mr. Barrowbridge did not move. Mr. Barrowbridge did not speak. Mr. Barrowbridge was dead.

Lance slammed his fists unmercifully against his own eyes and loosed a great agonized cry, and amidst the dots and splashes of painful speckled light from the blows, he backed away to the door, turned and plunged down the stairs.

In a boiling jumble of anguish he thought as he ran, It's all gone and I never had a mother to run to Piggott was my

mother Barrowbridge was my mother and a bed's a great mother's breast to cry on and feed me.

Across the great hall and a shin-hungry chair, rung-wringing to clatter and break and spin him grunting to the window, to fall there a-grasping and gripping and ripping the drape; cough in the dusty folds of it, fight them away and knee up and stumble and knee up again and go banging to bed to hide.

"Captain Courtenay how nice!" in clear sweet syllables each a true half-tone lower than the one before; and there in the bed he so needed for now sat Lilith Axelrood with her back to the bolster at the headboard and a white silk scarf arranged round her shoulders and her heavy hair arranged on the white silk.

Lance rocked in the doorway until he was able to raise one arm and point at her. His lungs filled and emptied with pain at the extremes, and when he tried to speak his lips disobeyed him and pursed, so that he half-whistled, half-wheezed, a Barrowbridge kind of noise. He stood insane in the doorway, pointing like that, wheezing like that, and then began to come across the room toward her, the one hand still pointing, the other forgotten, the legs striding wide apart like a sailor's in a hurricane.

"Lance!" she coquetted, holding out her arms to him, and "Lance!" she cried in alarm; and the next time she cried out it was not a word at all. He struck her like a charge of grapeshot, everywhere, he snapped, he struck, he flopped like a banked trout. Warding him off was impossible, so she threw slim steel arms about him and held him tight and tighter and tighter until she held him almost still. He was far stronger, but she could do it because he was utterly out of control. And his fighting became a shuddering and the shudder something else. Still he punished her, he flogged the wide world and all life and effort, but he was met in this, he flashed upward like a gusted gull, he stood over the world like a mountain, spread over it like a cloud; and the shudder again, now a shiver, now still, now still ...

She still held him tightly, but not altogether to protect herself. She pulled her head a little distance away, to see him better, and said tremulously, "Lance, you ... hurt me! Lance...?"



The sound of her voice struck the flames in him like a flung bowl of brandy, and they exploded. It was as violent as before, but as he punished the world and her, he punished himself and his stupidity, and his dreams for being stupid, and his acts for being stupid; he cut and slashed at the stupid thing of being alive until abruptly he was spent. He could not draw breath then for a painful time, and when he did, he expelled it in a woeful wail, and dropped his face into the hollow of her neck and shoulder and cried; he baaaed like a sheep, baaaoh, baaaoh, while she held him tight again, frightened; and then he escaped, he was asleep.

In his sleep he called, from far away: "Elaine?"

Asleep, he sat up in panic, his eyes wide, and shouted, "Elaine?"

Soft arms put him down, a soft hand covered his eyes until they closed. Softly, "*Shhh. Shhh.*"

He sniffled and twice there was an infantile, past-misery catch in his breath. He burrowed close, snug, snug and close, and slept quietly.

He awoke in the black dark, and far away there was a point of light which, if he came close enough, might be an opening through which he could look. He blinked hard to make it come clear, and suddenly it did, and was a candle across the room. He watched it for a time, pleased with it.

Under his cheek was something more firm, more smooth than a pillow, and down from his chin to the edge of the bed, a column lay. He raised his head to see, and under his cheek was a hand, and the column was an arm, and up from the edge of the bed came the hair and face of Lilith Axelrood. She knelt on the floor by the bed, and perhaps she had been sleeping there, but she had kept her hand under his face so that she would know when he awoke.

He looked at her in silent amazement. She straightened up and bent over him, so that her hair fell over both their faces like a magic tent. And she said in a tone he had never heard before, that he would have believed impossible to a human throat, so soft and full and intense it was: "*Oh-h-h ... I—love—you—so ...*" and when he opened his mouth to answer she dropped her lips to it, with an illimitable

tenderness he surely would have missed had he not been too weak to move.

She slipped away from him and was back in three heartbeats with the thick earthen bowl of broth which had stood covered on the tabouret. She set it on the floor and removed the cover, and took broken bread and dipped it and put it to his lips. He took it slowly, watching her face the whole time. When it was about half-finished he shook his head slightly, and she put it by, staying where she was just to watch him live.

“Lilith Axelrood,” he said.

“Lance ...” She stroked his face. He fell asleep. When she was sure, she rose carefully and crossed the room on tiptoe and blew out the candle.

Lance went out and walked to the footbridge and stood looking down at the water quarreling about the pebbles below. He could not believe the morning and he did not remember the night, and he knew he must and would.

What was this madness about marriage? Who had spoken of it first?

On impulse he crossed the bridge and stepped down the bank and knelt to dash the clear bubbly water into his face. Talk, talk, talk with Lilith, and it was a haze until now, but now it came, not in order, but clearly enough:

“I have all the Kingston properties in England; they’re mine,” she had said, and “I didn’t know, I didn’t know I’d love you. I didn’t know love.” Oh yes, and: “I came here for her, because she wanted to know just what you were going to do next, and I was to dazzle you and find out. But oh Lance, I didn’t know this would happen!” That’s right, that’s right, and she had said, too, that she had the Duchess’s permission to leave her service, but that if she did the Duchess would punish her, “I don’t know how. I wouldn’t know, until it happened. She says I may go, but she doesn’t want me to, not really.”

And what was that about the last time: “I couldn’t forget you. I wanted to, but I couldn’t. It wasn’t like this, it was just a glow that wouldn’t go away ... remember, Lance, what I said about wanting only to find out how high is high? This is high enough, my darling my dear; I want no

more, ever again, than this.”

Somewhere in midmorning there returned his daily-man, woeful adjutant to the slow parade he led: the doctor's black rig bearing the priest, and a wagon with three laborers and a coffin for Mr. Barrowbridge, all summoned at dawn from Tatsfield. (Lilith had said “The Duchess *said* he was here, but we couldn't find out ... Lance, you loved him, didn't you?”) They put him to sleep beside old Piggott, in a little burial ground which had not been used for three centuries; and when the priest said the right words, old Johnson said the real ones, without words; Lance, suddenly overcome, watching the spadeful of earth showering down, said an anguished thing within himself. Oddly enough, it was not said to Barrowbridge; it was “Ah, Piggott, if you forgive me I'll ...” and was never finished. It tore him, which he could ill afford, and he returned to the house and Lilith, who held him until he could talk again.

And the talk came around again to the marriage ... who talked it first?

He didn't know. ... Well, what does it matter who first?

“This time yesterday I'd have wangled to marry you or not, Lance, whichever suited me, and it wouldn't have suited me. Now... oh, my *darling!*”

“I have nothing, I shall never have anything of my own!” he had cried suddenly, remembering. And she had laughed and kissed him in the new tender way he had just learned was possible. “What's mine is yours, beloved. What's getting, as long as you get? What's having as long as you have? Wouldn't you have wanted the Kingston holdings? Then why not take them from me?”

How to trust her? But surely, though she had words and words, could she counterfeit that light in her eyes, that never-before tone in her voice? And hadn't she said ... “Decide, Lance—a clear decision. If it's no, promise, oh promise to see me whenever you can. Or ... don't promise that; just say no. But say yes if you can, even if you almost can; I'll make up the difference for you, you'll see.”

Elaine.

He had kissed Elaine once, and virtually this same thing had happened. But it had happened to both of them, whereas here, only Lilith was affected. He might be, but he

wasn't now, or wasn't yet.

He shook his bothered head confusedly. Lilith was away at noon, gone up to London to see Beasley, and perhaps the Duchess. She would be back tonight, or tomorrow.

*Once upon a time there was a prince, and he was invisible ... and the wicked old witch was banished, and he took all the lands and castles and everybody could see him.*

(How do you kiss a wish?)

"Mr. Barrowbridge!" he yelled at the top of his voice. Johnson popped out of the kitchen door and looked at him, wringing her hands. "What shall I do, sir?" Lance whispered.

The brook bubbled and a bird sang. Somebody said something about a moth in a room of a thousand lights, safe on a cold candle.

Years back in his mind, somebody said something about a libertine.

"I, libertine," murmured Lance Courtenay, "being of sound mind and clear faculties, do hereby depose and declare that all my life has been a grind and a climb; that in spite of how I might seem to the chaps in the City who think I am a young gentleman of leisure, or to Johnson to whom I am but a Power which comes and goes in mystery; or to Lilith, who loves me, or to Elaine Eustace, whom I love with all my heart ...

"Or to Barrowbridge, to whom I could have been but an ingenious incompetent ...

"Or to Piggott, to whom I was a serpent ...

"Or to Meadows, who calls me philanthropist, or Hepzibah, who says godling and genius ..."

His eyes began to sting, and he closed them and bowed his head, and breathed with difficulty. "Or to my mother," he whispered, "who wants me the way I am more than she wants my death ...

"I therefore hereby and whereas," he choked, and shook himself, "do now and forever forswear the paths into which I am pushed, and choose those by which I shall profit; and the color of that profit shall be that for which I have been starved all my life—my pleasure. And because never in my life have I had life's permission to develop the taste for

simple pleasures, I shall pursue dark ones.

“And the darkest direction for me now is to marry a woman of great property who loves me, and through her and her property to pursue, by falsehood and chicanery and insincerity, the Courtenay crest. I shall kill if I must to get it; I shall not regard it as a triumph unless I trample the innocents to get it, slander and slaughter and destroy; and all of this I shall enjoy.

“So never again will life, or Elizabeth, Duchess of Kingston, stay me; there is nothing more she can do to me; she has done it all.

“Never again will the idea of destiny tempt me; no fortune unwrought by a man himself is to be trusted. A man makes his own fortune. I have fought and striven all my life for the simple thing of having a decent man call me a decent man—just that—and since destiny has never had that for me, I’ll have no more to do with destiny.

“Hereafter, then, let it be Lilith and the libertine. I shall make her very happy, and the rest of the world—afraid.”

It grew dark and late. Lily had gone up to town unattended; he should have got someone to go with her; he hoped she had secured someone to come back. He ate a cold mutton sandwich and changed his shirt for a better one, and changed his boots twice. He tried to read, and he tried to write to Meadows to explain matters. When the rider clumped into the stable yard he whipped a comb through his side hair, ran to the door, and flung it open to the first sound of footsteps outside. “Yes, darling—yes!” he cried.

“Righto. What? What?” said Sir Gregory Eustace, blinking in out of the dark. “Courtenay. I say, good evening, what?”

“Oh, sir, I *do* beg your pardon,” said Lance, overcome. He pulled himself together. “Come in, sir, come in. I was ... uh ... expecting, you know, someone else.”

“Sh’d say so. Yes. Darling, what?”

“Oh yes,” said Lance. “T. D. Darling, you know, Holcomb barrister. Nice chap.”

“Nice chap, yes,” said Sir Gregory. “Don’t know him.” He stood in the middle of the great hall while Lance got out the port.

"What can I do for you, sir?"

"Like old times, what? Accept, ah, apology."

"Apology? I? Sir Gregory, what on earth ..."

"Way I acted. City. Shakin' jolly-well fist. That sort of rot."

Lance recalled, now, in that awful moment when the yellow carriage met him, Elaine running toward him in some sort of distress, and at the corner, the small angry figure of the baronet. "Why, sir, I noticed nothing."

"Decent of you, but *haw!* must confess. Very angry. Book, y'know. Gibbon, *Decline and Fall*. Blamed you."

"You were angry at me because of the book?"

"Way you handed it over. Source book. Hah! Blooming masterpiece. Never do anything like it in three lifetimes. All my work, up the spout, what? Years. Thought you were making a fool o' me."

"My dear Sir Gregory, I didn't read a blessed thing in the book but the title. I heard it was good, that's all."

"Thought o' that later. Upset, y'know. Forbade Elaine speak to you. Hah! Defied me, see that? Right on London street, what? Lots o' pepper, that gel." He raised his glass. "Cheers."

"Cheer'o. ... I'm terribly sorry if the book ..."

"Not'tall, old chap. Good of you. Well, I'll pop. Very, very decent of you. 'Night."

Lance saw him to the door. "Good night, sir."

"Start on something else now. Blessed 'f I know what, what? 'Night. Very decent of you, old chap."

"Good night." He held the door open and looked out into the blackness, hearing a dwindling mutter around to the stable yard of "Decent of you. Awfully decent. Decent chap. ..."

It grew really late, and Lance's worriment reached a peak and passed it. If she's not here by ten, he thought, then she'll stay over and be here tomorrow. And as he concluded this, he heard the hoofs outside. He ran to the door, and snatched it open at the first step, saying nothing at all this time.

And a good thing too; it was a dusty footman—Haines, of Blanton House.

"Ah. Good evening, Haines."

“Evenin’, sir. Letter for you.”

Lance took the letter curiously. It bore his name, nothing else, on the outside, and was sealed without a signet. He left it on the hall table and brought Haines a shilling and a spot of brandy. “Thankee’ sir,” said the man, and with simultaneous motions threw the brandy down his throat and the shilling into his pocket. He saluted and left.

Lance took the letter to an easy chair and sat down with his back to two candles. Something told him he must settle himself and take this at ease.

He opened it and grunted. Lilith.

He read:

*My very darling:*

*I must say what I have to say briefly and quickly, or never say it at all.*

*I have told the Duchess that we would marry if it suited you. She said immediately that we must not. I’m afraid I rather lost my head at that but now I confess she is right. Her reason, and this is exactly what she said, is this: “If you marry him, I shall tell you who your mother is.”*

*Lance, I can’t tell you what she means—I don’t know. I have known her all my life. I have not known anything of my parents. And darling, it does not matter whether or not her horrid suggestion is true—she would use it, you know she would.*

*I told you she would punish me because I wanted to leave her. And you know how far she will go to punish you. There is nothing we can do, my darling. She has won again, as she always wins.*

*I was free to come to you and tell you, but I dare not. I shall remain in England ... she is keeping her promise about the Kingston lands here, but I mistrust it; doubtless she will let it all revert to the Meadows when she dies. I have earned her hatred, and I think that she would express it so.*

*Beloved ... oh, my beloved ... go to your  
Elaine and be happy with her. High enough is  
—high enough, my dear.*

*Your own,  
Lilith*

*P.S. If you think of me as a sister, then at least  
you may love me a little.*

There was a spatter of tears across the shaky postscript.

Slowly Lance lowered the letter to his knee and bowed his head.

Strike Elizabeth Chudleigh with a zephyr and she'll respond with a hurricane.

Lilith ... Lilith ... (Lilith was the devil's brother.)

(Who the devil had told her about Elaine?)

I ... devil?

"Oh, *no!*" Lance said aloud. And as he said it, madness trickled out of him like a dark fluid and lay all about him before it evaporated spiritously, leaving of itself no trace; and he saw the meaning of that pleasure which had eluded him all his life.

He had striven for what Barrowbridge felt he should have, so hard that when fortune handed him a silver platter piled with happy fruits, he was suspicious even of the platter, and especially of the donor. He had taken as his own the revenge of an old man, confusing it with the bright, dark desire to be a libertine—a devil if you like—that lives in all men. And after all, there had been Lilith.

But when, he demanded of himself, were you ever something that you wanted to be, when did you strive for something because you wanted it? Where is the one thing you have ever found that you wanted?

Unaccountably, he felt wonderful. Marvelous. He closed his eyes and looked at tomorrow, and made a wish. He kissed the wish.



# AFTERWARD

THE STORY OF ELIZABETH Chudleigh is substantially true; she was, and she did, all the things herein described. She was undoubtedly an extraordinary woman. Perhaps it would be of interest to the reader to know what happened to her afterward.

She left England in 1776, after having been found guilty in the trial by the House of Lords, and never returned.

She finally repaired to St. Petersburg, where she became fast friends with Catherine the Great. There she built a fabulous estate, calling it Chudleigh. Catherine was nine years her junior—specifically, 50 to the Duchess's 59 years; and one of the most intriguing of conjectures is the nature of the reminiscences these two colorful old biddies must have shared over their tea.

Elizabeth, Duchess of Kingston, died in 1788 at the age of 68, and the title died with her. The estate did indeed go to Charles Meadows, a nephew of the Duke, though Evelyn Meadows, who had brought the suit for bigamy, was still alive.

These odds and ends might be of interest to you, too, as they were to me:

The suit for jactitation of marriage has descended to the common law and is a legitimate action, though still extremely rare.

It was not until 1835 that consanguineous marriages in England became automatically void. Before that, they were voidable but quite binding and valid until voided.

The earldom of Devon, which died in Padua in 1556 in the person of Edward Courtenay, was twice gained and lost, once by a Blount and once by a Cavendish. In 1831 one William Courtenay, a respected clerk of Parliament, equipped with a far-reaching genealogy and the fact of omission of the *de corpore suo* clause in the ancient Courtenay patent—that is to say, technically succession need not follow from the duke's issue, but was allowable from a collateral—actually succeeded in reviving the title,

and it still exists.

# AFTERWORD

THE AUTHOR URGES HISTORICALLY minded sharpshooters to draw their beads on this narrative, and wishes them good hunting. They will find certain licenses in my *Libertine*—as a small example, the unseasonably warm weather when everyone *knows* Elizabeth's suit for jactitation took place in February 1769—and more power to them. When they are done, let them proceed to Aesop and delete everything they find there about talking animals.

In short, this is a fable, written by and for the dilettante of the fabulous. It was extraordinarily easy and pleasant to write and it is hoped that it is correspondingly easy and pleasant to read.

Acknowledgment must be made to those without whom the book and the author surely never would have been known at all. First, there is Mr. T. H. White, whose *Age of Scandal* served up Elizabeth Chudleigh, hot and crackling in her transparent gown. Mr. Theodore Sturgeon assisted nobly with the research, Mr. Jean Shepherd pushed and *pushed* at the author until he was, in the world of books, born; and last mentioned but first of all, the Night People whose battle-cry is *Excelsior*, and whose humor and forbearance are really responsible for the work.

# A Biography of Theodore Sturgeon

Theodore Hamilton Sturgeon (1918–1985) is the acclaimed author of eleven novels and more than two hundred short stories. Considered to be among the most influential writers of science fiction's "Golden Age," he won the International Fantasy Award for his novel *More Than Human*, and the Hugo and Nebula Awards for his short story "Slow Sculpture."

Born Edward Hamilton Waldo in Staten Island, New York, Sturgeon was the son of Edward Molineaux Waldo, a paint and dye manufacturer, and Christine Hamilton Waldo, a teacher. At the age of eleven, following his mother's remarriage, his name was legally changed to Theodore Sturgeon.

Sturgeon began writing stories and poems during the three years he spent working as an engine room laborer on a freighter. Beginning in 1938, he published short stories for genre and general market publications including *Astounding* (now *Analog Science Fiction and Fact*), *Unknown Worlds of Science Fiction*, and *Argosy*. His groundbreaking short story "The World Well Lost" (1953), which was among the first science fiction stories to include positive themes of homosexuality, went on to win the Gaylactic Spectrum Award in 2000.

Sturgeon's 1953 novel *More Than Human* was considered groundbreaking for science fiction in its stylistic daring, fine characterization, and visionary impact. Offering the idea that the next step in human evolution was a gestalt organism composed of people with different and strange talents who "bled," *More Than Human* was an inspiration to many in the 1960s counterculture, including artists and musicians such as the Grateful Dead and Crosby, Stills and Nash.

In the 1960s, Sturgeon ventured into television writing, penning the screenplays for two of the most popular *Star*

*Trek* episodes: “Shore Leave” (1966) and “Amok Time” (1967). He is credited with inventing the story of Spock’s sex life, as well as the famous Vulcan greeting, “Live long and prosper,” and (with Leonard Nimoy) its accompanying hand signal. Two of Sturgeon’s stories were adapted for *The New Twilight Zone*, and his novella *Killdozer!* (1944) became a television movie in 1974. He is also the creator of Sturgeon’s Law—90 percent of everything is crap—which he developed to counter the common denigration of science fiction as a genre.

Beloved by critics and readers alike, Sturgeon inspired a generation of authors across genres, such as Samuel R. Delany, Michael Chabon, Jonathan Lethem, Octavia E. Butler, Karen Joy Fowler, and Rad Bradbury. Kurt Vonnegut considered Sturgeon to be one of the best writers in America, and Sturgeon served as inspiration for Vonnegut’s recurring character, Kilgore Trout.

Survived by his seven children, Sturgeon died in Eugene, Oregon, on May 8, 1985. In 2000, he was posthumously inducted into the Science Fiction Hall of Fame.

In the matter of Adoption of : Municipal Court  
EDWARD H. WALDO : November Term 1928.  
Minor : No. 1205

DECREE

AND NOW, to wit, the 30th day of November, 1928,  
the Court, being satisfied that the statements made in the annexed  
petition are true, and that the welfare of Edward H. Waldo, minor,  
will be promoted by his adoption, and that all the requirements of  
the Act of July 11, 1923, P.L. 1035, have been complied with,

IT IS HEREBY DECREED that Edward H. Waldo shall be in law  
the adopted child and heir of the petitioners, William D. Sturgeon  
and Christine H. Sturgeon, and be subject to the duties of such  
child, and that he shall assume the surname of the petitioners and  
be known as Edward H. Sturgeon.

Charles L. Brown  
J.

CERTIFIED FROM THE RECORD THIS 6th DAY OF DECEMBER A.D. 1928/

*L. V. Sturge*  
PRO CLERK



The decree wherein Sturgeon is officially adopted by his stepfather (William "Argyll" D. Sturgeon) and his mother, and his last name is changed accordingly, from "Waldo" to "Sturgeon." (Photo courtesy of Special Collections, Kenneth Spencer Research Library, University of Kansas.)

# Pennsylvania State Nautical Schoolship "Annapolis"

348 BOURSE BUILDING, PHILADELPHIA

REPORT OF

CADET

*Theodore A. Sturgeon*

for the month of

*March*

1937

## SUBJECTS:

## AVERAGE

Adaptability and Prof. Fitness . .	70
Drawing . . . . .	
Electricity . . . . .	
*Hygiene . . . . .	
Journal . . . . .	
Machine Shop Practice . . . .	
Mechanics . . . . .	
Meteorology . . . . .	
Naval Architecture . . . . .	
Navigation . . . . .	83
*Practical Seamanship . . . .	78 -
Rules of the Road . . . . .	
Seamanship . . . . .	76
Signals . . . . .	78
Steam Engineering . . . . .	
Storage of Cargo . . . . .	
Third Mate's Questions . . . .	

GENERAL AVERAGE . .

76.4

NUMBER IN CLASS *17*

CLASS STANDING *17*

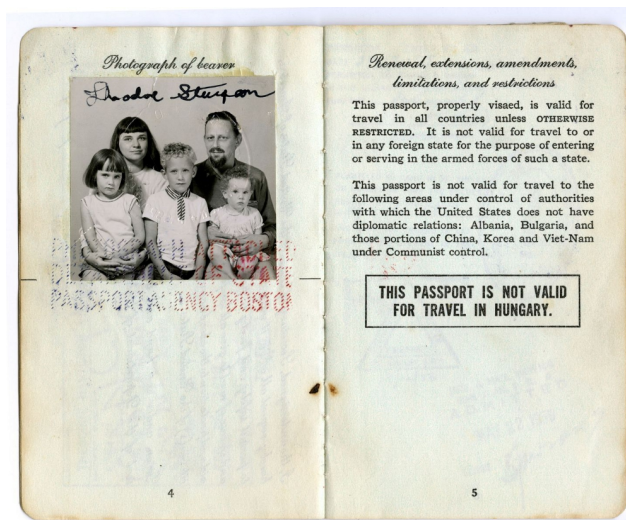
DEMERITS

*J. F. Hines*

\*SEA TERM

*Superintendent*

Sturgeon's report card from the Pennsylvania State Nautical Schoolship "Annapolis" postmarked April 10, 1937, showing his rank as last in his class of cadets. (Photo courtesy of Special Collections, Kenneth Spencer Research Library, University of Kansas.)



**Sturgeon with his third wife, Marion McGahan, and (left to right) daughter Tandy (b. 1954), son Robin (b. 1952), and daughter Noël (b. 1956).**



95  
262 224

→ they approached, and something heavy ~~xxx~~ slid. He looked at Janie and knew that she was doing it. He had asked her how she moved things; she had said briefly that psychodynamic energy could damp ~~main~~ molecules in their motion, so that most moved in the direction she chose, taking the entire object with them. If for no other reason, he thought whimsically, he had to get out of this alive -- he couldn't bear to be teased by such a tiny taste of this astonishing subject. Scientist though he was, he still felt like a bushman hearing his first phonograph; how, he thought, how did they get the man into the little box?

135  
136 The gate opened, and closed behind them. Here the woods were just the same, the trees as large and as thick, but the path was of brick and took only two turns. The first made the wall invisible, and the second, a quarter of a mile further, revealed the house.

137  
138 It was too low and much too wide. Its roof was mounded rather than peaked or gabled. When they drew closer to it, he could see at each ~~xx~~ flank the heavy, <sup>gray</sup> green wall, and he knew that this whole area was in prison.

what  
"I don't, either," said Janie. He was glad she watched his face.

Gooble.

Someone stood behind a great twisted oak near the house, peeping at them. "Wait, Hip." Janie walked quickly to the tree and spoke to someone. He heard her say, "You've got to. Do you want me dead?"

That seemed to settle the argument. As Janie returned, he peered at the tree, but now there seemed to be no one there.

"It was Beanie," said Janie. "You'll meet her later. Come."

The door was ironbound, of heavy oak planks. It fitted, with curious concealed hinges, into the massive archway from which it took its shape. The only windows to be seen were high up, in the mound-like gables, and they were mere barred slits. A facade like this, he thought,

A typescript page from *More Than Human* with handwritten edits. (Photo courtesy of Special Collections, Kenneth Spencer Research Library, University of Kansas.)

This is a quick maundering on a short story for somebody. In my mind is a character thing, a little like THE KNIFE or that thing about the girl leaving the dentist (but without the dream-switch: just straight. And "This is a story without a beginning or end" with a final line "Maybe the story has an ending after all." Think along terms as weird as that "Why are you doing that" gem. Come on now, at least make a start.

There's something in this traditional; inner-directed; other-directed; and autonomous-man, especially the latter with this "play" matrix. The play's the thing. Just a first page, kid, then you can sleep ...

THE RUSSIANS WON THE WAR. Story of tight situation, iron curtain sealed and tense-to-bursting; news of strange goings-on in a satellite area. Fov goes there, finds a bunch of espers. Seems third generation of double-thinkers are on to multivalued logic in all its potential.

What are the most compelling emotions to get emotional about? In SAUCER it was loneliness. In A WAY HOME it was pathos and self-discovery.

The story of an angry man, denied expression of all his anger mostly because no one would ever listen to him. His voice is unimpressive; because of that his presence is; because of that no one ever listens to him

Could this be part of a series of purely shorts? Link character is a happy analyst with a home workshop that really is something. Dr. Boniface. A sort of juvenile series for adults.

One could be the angry man story, tied into the subsonic resonance gimmick.

Two could deal with the variable-opacity TV system, maybe threatening to break someone's profitable interest in the phosphor system.

Three could be the home-movie-on-TV idea, the "audiovid".

I've got to brief out the rest of this yarn, but right now.  
So far I hope the reader knows there's something different about me, that I'm scared, that my kid's on the way to the hospital and is in great danger.  
My immediate problem is how soon to let him in on my telepathy.

A page from Sturgeon's "inspiration file." (Photo courtesy of Special Collections, Kenneth Spencer Research Library, University of Kansas.)

STAR TREK  
Sturgeon

New Story  
Dec 6 1966

SPOCK BLOWS TOP  
AMOK TIME

T. Kuna  
3:00

#### Teaser

All quiet and peaceful aboard. Sounds of argument and tantrum. Yeoman comes hurtling through door in fright. Crockery crashes on doorstep. Kirk and McCoy to door. Near miss, more crackery. It's Spock.

#### Act One

Spock objects to course change. Overruled, he starts to get emotional in several areas. It gets so bad he's called to account. He's forced to reveal that Vulcanians have seasonal mating time, like salmon; maybe once in a lifetime, and his is upon him. Previous course would have permitted a leave near "wife" chosen for him at age 8; no one need know. Now, however, he can't meet her, can't cut it. End of act, he resigns.

#### Act Two

Kirk won't accept resignation. Finds it possible to compromise course, complete scheduled mission, if "wife" is brought aboard (or meet on planet). Spock mollified. They pick up (or meet) wife. Further revelation of Vulcanian lore: ancient unbreakable ritual is that she must choose a rival: rival and "husband" must fight to the death before consummation. Spock expected her to have another Vulcanian with her: she has not. (or maybe she has). but at 29, she chooses the rival: KIRK!

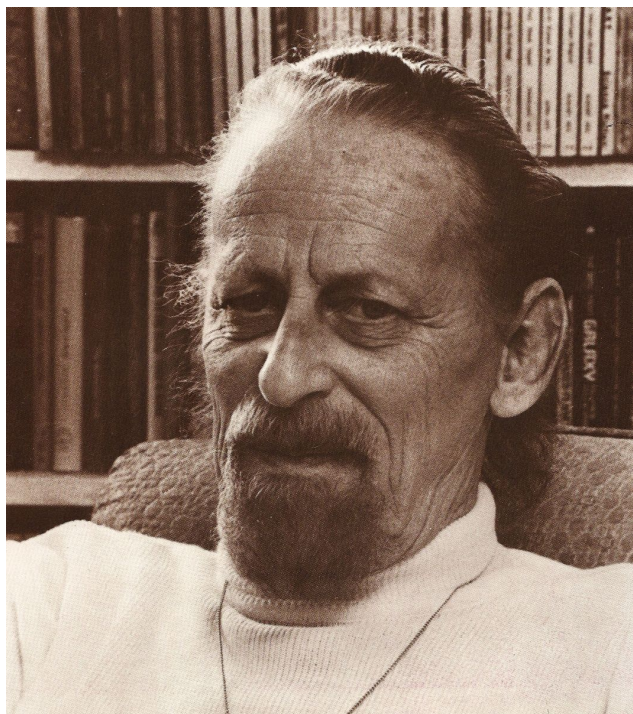
#### Act Three

Combat, Kirk and Spock. Kirk means to pull punches but is forced to realize Spock can't and won't/ Kirk is killed.

#### Act Four

Dramatic scene between Spock and wife. She has rebelled against the old order, loves someone else, has set it up this way hoping Spock will be killed with honor, then that Kirk won't want her. Enraptured with her, appalled at what he's done, Spock offers vital sacrifice to resurrect Kirk. And so he does -- he thinks. Actually, Kirk is "dead" because of secret treatment McCoy has given him which only he, Kirk and the viewers know about. So in the end all is back to normal.

Notes, dated 6/12/66 and entitled "Spock Blows Top," for an episode of *Star Trek* that Sturgeon wrote, ultimately titled "Amok Time." (Photo courtesy of Special Collections, Kenneth Spencer Research Library, University of Kansas.)



**Sturgeon in his library.**



**The Theodore Sturgeon Memorial Award trophy, designed by Elden Tefft. The Gunn Center for the Study of Science Fiction at the University of Kansas presents the award annually for the genre's best short stories of the year. (Photo courtesy of the Gunn Center for the Study of Science Fiction.)**



**From left to right, author N. K. Jemisin; Noël Sturgeon, Theodore's daughter and trustee of the Theodore Sturgeon Literary Trust; and author Samuel R. Delany at a May 4, 2011, tribute to Sturgeon, sponsored by the *New York Review of Science Fiction*. (Photo courtesy of Marc Blackman.)**



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Cover design by Mauricio Diaz

978-1-4804-1010-7

This edition published in 2013 by Open Road Integrated Media

345 Hudson Street

New York, NY 10014

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